

# JOURNAL of COMPARATIVE LITERATURE and AESTHETICS

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Volume 44

| Number 4

| Winter 2021

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TELLING LIVES, SIGNIFYING SELVES  
Life Writing, Representation, and Identity  
Special Issue Editor: Mukul Chaturvedi

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A Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute Publication  
Founding Editor: A. C. Sukla  
RNI Regn. No. 35624/79  
ISSN 0252-8169

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Layout and Typesetting: Bhaktahari Dash  
Printed at Print-Tech Offset Pvt. Ltd., Bhubaneswar, India

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Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute

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# Telling Lives, Signifying Selves: Life Writing, Representation, and Identity

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MUKUL CHATURVEDI

*Life piles up so fast that I have no time to write out the equally fast rising mound of reflections.*  
Virginia Woolf

## Introduction

Since the last two decades life writing has emerged as an umbrella term for a host of self-referential forms that have expanded the traditional literary domains of biography and autobiography. Focusing on a range of life writing forms, the eclectic collection of essays in this special issue explore the multiple ways in which the production, circulation, and consumption of life writing has helped to reimagine and redefine individual and collective identities in a different cultural and geopolitical contexts. A comparative perspective illuminates the common concerns of life writing across linguistic and national boundaries, highlighting the compelling reasons for the resurgence of various modes of storytelling in contemporary times. The overwhelming response to the call for papers for the special issue and the wide ranging themes explored in the essays bears testimony to a growing academic interest in life writing forms globally. In the Indian context, there has been a veritable boom in the publication of Dalit life narratives, literary memoirs, illness narratives, celebrity narratives, testimonies of migration and exile, trans and queer narratives, blogs on social media, and much more. While the preoccupation with sharing stories remains a basic human impulse, in a multilingual society like India, translation has played a key role in the current and growing interest in life writing and its wider dissemination through English language translation. Besides life writing texts in Urdu, Hindi, Tamil, Bangla, Oriya, and Nepali, this special issue also includes life writing texts in Spanish, Catalan, French, Italian, Chinese and of course English. The rich linguistic and cultural diversity is accompanied by an equally wide array of forms like working class autobiography, life stories on Subreddit, Tibetan autobiography, Dalit life narrative, bio fiction, trauma narrative, Partition memoir, testimonial novel, graphic narrative, fictionalized autobiography and historical fiction.

## Defining Life Writing

In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Writing*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define life writing as “an overarching term used for a variety of non-fictional modes of writing that claim to engage the shaping of someone’s life” (17). Marlene Kadar’s influential book, *Essays on Life-writing: from genre to critical practice*, discusses life-writing in detail and describes it “as genre of documents or fragments of documents written out of life, or unabashedly out of personal experience of the writer” (29). An inclusive genre, it covers personal essays, testimony, diary, oral accounts, letters, journals, memoirs, travel writing, graphic memoirs, and digital storytelling on social media. In their expanded edition (2010) Smith and Watson propose sixty (to the former fifty two) subgenres of life

writing, which is likely to be expanded even further. While life writing is generally associated with non-fictional narratives or self-inflected modes of storytelling, it also includes fictional texts such as the auto fiction, bio fiction which are fictionalized accounts of individual lives but have a “a thematic concern of life or self.” (Kadar 29) Traversing different disciplinary terrains like journalism, anthropology, history, literature, and psychology, life writing blurs the generic boundaries between history, fiction, and documentary narrative. One of the significant aspect of life writing is that it has democratized the autobiographical discourse by expanding its generic boundaries and calls into question the “ideologically fraught category of autobiography ... in which masculinist ideology has often dictated formal and epistemological terms of the genres.” (Smith and Watson 18) Given the elastic nature of the genre, life writing has been defined widely by scholars, but as Kadar rightly observes, it’s not a fixed term, and functions both as a genre and critical practice, constantly evolving with changing literary and political movements. (1-3)

### **From Autobiography to Life Writing**

The shift from autobiography studies to life writing studies since the 1990’s can be attributed the theoretical interventions and the interdisciplinary turn in literature and cultural studies that expanded the field of autobiography. Early scholars of like Georges Gusdorf established autobiography as the story of an unique individual and traced the rise of modern autobiography to Augustine, Rousseau, and Enlightenment individualism. As a literary genre, autobiography was seen as providing direct access to the author’s self and the intention of the author and his commitment ‘truth’ was often unquestioned. (Pascal 1960; Weintraub 1978) Phillipe Lejeune’s widely cited definition of autobiography, and his notion ‘autobiographical pact’ consolidated the widely held assumptions about the genre. “A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality. (193) However, since this definition does not provide the necessary distinction with other related genres of biography and fiction, Lejeune calls for a complete identification between the “author, narrator and protagonist” and makes this condition necessary for autobiography. (193) Credited with coining the term ‘autobiographical pact’ or ‘contract,’ based on ‘an intention to honour the signature’, Lejeune consolidates the authorship question where the author of an autobiography declares that he is the same as the narrator and the protagonist. These formulations of autobiography that focussed on authenticity, autonomy, self-realization, and authority of the narrator valued the genre for foregrounding a universal subject whose life narration reflected universal human nature and values. For James Olney ‘it is a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries’ that accounts for the special appeal of autobiography. (23) Thus, autobiography promoted an essentialist notion of selfhood, a self that could be realized and truthfully represented. The notion of a coherent and autonomous self, assumed a transparency of language and saw the formation of autobiographical subjectivity as an affirmation of individual identity. The exclusive focus on the individual, was one of the reasons why autobiography came to be identified as a ‘Western’ genre the ‘master’ narrative of the great ‘individual’, and privileged White man of property. (Smith and Watson)

Critical interventions by poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist inflections in autobiographical studies drew attention to ideological underpinnings of the autobiographical tradition and reframed the terms of debate. Poststructuralist theorisations of autobiography sounded a death knell for the unified and autonomous subject of the autobiography. Paul de Man’s, path breaking essay ‘Autobiography as De-Defacement’ (1979) proposed that autobiography is not a genre or a mode but “a figure of reading and understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts.” (70) For de Man, the importance

of autobiography is not that “it reveals reliable self-knowledge”(71) rather it produces an illusion of reference, and all knowledge, including self-knowledge depends on tropes or figurative language. By undermining the unified autobiographical subject, referentiality of language, and announcing the death of the author (Barthes 1968) poststructuralist formulations of autobiography questioned the ‘law of genre’, (Derrida 1980) that validated certain autobiographical writings and excluded others. In drawing attention to the limitations of cultural theory for its universalist paradigm of knowledge and Eurocentric bias, postcolonial critical interventions in autobiographical studies drew attention to the politics of representation as it excluded a whole range of peoples who were historically marginalised and also excluded from written modes of narrative. Addressing the cultural and social significance of these narratives and examining the various ways of reconfiguring the self in non-Western contexts, postcolonial interventions expanded field of self-representation into a variety of narrative forms that enabled the articulation of subjectivities that had hitherto been excluded from the realms of representation. Several influential studies in the field, notable among them by (Whitlock 2015; Moore 2009; Huddart 2014; and Majeed 2007) have examined postcolonial life writing as a distinct category with key features and the way it differs from and is analogous to its Western counterparts. There have been studies, though not too many, focusing exclusively on gender and self-making in South Asia (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2015) analyses of biographical and life writing tradition in India (Arnold and Blackburn 2004) and more recently, Uday Kumar’s (2016) study on the relationship between literature, autobiography, and history in the context of Kerala. Postcolonial feminist scholars saw the deconstruction of the privileged, white masculine subject, as offering an opportunity for a more radical function of autobiography, as “now it has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness—women, black people, working class people have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself. (Swindells 1995:7)

The expansion in the field of autobiography has led to a proliferation of genres that make the life narration possible to peoples whose lives and stories perhaps did not did not matter and were not considered worthy of engagement. Focusing on the everyday aspects of culture and modes of being, life writing marks a move away from individualism and affirmation of the subject to a more inclusive understanding where life narration is a process of identity formation, which does not attempt to objectify or subjectify the nature of a particular cultural truth. (Kadar 1992) Scholarly interest in life writing spawned owing to an interest in the issues of margins, intersections, crossings, and practices of subversion and resistance. The stories of survivors of exile, migration, refugee, trauma, violence, locate life writing in here in now, as an experiential narrative, located in particular social and political context. Advances in trauma studies, especially in relation to Partition, Holocaust survivors, immigrant and transcultural subjects has revitalized the autobiographical discourse and this fact is borne out by a virtual publishing boom in memoirs, diaries, witness narratives, graphic memoirs, testimonies, autoethnography, bio fiction and of course digital storytelling on social and multimedia platforms. The wide-ranging concerns of life writing have reframed the terms and understanding of autobiographical subjectivity and mark a shift away the individual to a more relational understanding of self. Foregrounding a ‘relational model of identity’, John Paul Eakin emphasizes social sources of identity arguing that the self is defined by and lives in relation to others. Life writing is not an exclusive genre but a process of identity formation, where the self and the story we narrate of the self are constantly evolving. (114). The broad concerns discussed above are reflected in the special issue. The articles engage with



reinscribing forgotten histories, memories of homeland and exile, marginalized identities, the essays also draw attention to the liminality of the subject and a complex formation of subjectivity, emphasizing life writing as a constantly evolving process. Life writing is also helps in understanding history as individual lives are implicated in larger history and serve as a link between collective and personal accounts of cultural memory.

### **Memories of Migration, Exile and Home**

Memories of exile and migration constitute a large corpus of life writing. A defining moment in South Asian history, memories of Partition still animate popular imagination in India and continue to shape contemporary debates about identity and ideas of nationhood. Moving beyond traditional narratives of exile and resettlement, Debjani Sengupta's essay on the Sunanda Shikdar's Partition memoir raises important questions about ideas of home and belonging and how identities are shaped by moving or staying in one place. Shikdar's memoir about her years spent in East Pakistan, as her family stayed back in India after 1947, recreates the warm pastoral world of village life, yet shines light on the issues of caste and religion, which continue to affect the new nation's formation. Kritika Chettri's essay on Teknath Rizal's Nepali memoir raises questions about recounting those lives that do not fit within the given 'frames' of nation and ethnicity and how they impact the experiences in one's life. Drawing on Judith Butler's formulation of 'frames' and Agamben's notion of 'bare life', Chettri's essay examines Rizal's precarious existence as he is stripped of his citizenship and exiled from his land of birth, Bhutan. Imprisoned for a decade on fabricated charges, the essay traces the trajectory of Rizal's life as he moves from Bhutan to India to Nepal and how these changes affect the framing of self. Vijaya Venkatraman's paper on Spanish Moroccan writer, Najat El Hachmi focuses on the liminality of identity as the narrator inhabits an in-between space because of migration from Morocco, her place of birth, to Spain. The paper argues that the narrator's fractured identity remains in a constant state of flux and by not confining herself to any of the identity and linguistic categories, the precarity of self makes Hachmi at once vulnerable and powerful.

### **Dalit life Writing and Translation**

Any discussion of life writing in the Indian context is inextricably linked to the emergence of Dalit life writing and how it has given voice to marginalised and silenced communities. A powerful genre unto itself, Dalit autobiographies question the cultural, political, and social exclusion of Dalits from dominant discourse and links individual lives and struggles with their community. Translation has played a key role in disseminating Dalit autobiography, given recognition to the struggles of the people, helped in building solidarities, and appeals for a democratic and a just social order. B Mangalam's essay on Gunasekharan's *Vadu* examines the discriminatory social structure that shapes the narrator's life in the larger context of Tamil Dalit autobiography. A non-linear narrative, the use of stone inscriptions, photographs, songs, oral narratives create a polyphony of voices that offer a historical perspective and a powerful critique of caste hegemony. Rajkumar's essay on Odia autobiography focuses on caste and gender dynamics while juxtaposing the stories of two Gandhians who were committed the social welfare and upliftment of the poor. Tracing the evolution of Nishankar Das, a Dalit, as a Gandhian long with Rama Devi, an upper caste woman, the paper examines how caste shapes an individual's life's journey and experiences despite sharing the common goal Gandhian gram swaraj. Caste based humiliation, agony, and betrayal informs Unnikrishnan's discussion of Bhanwar Meghwanshi, a Dalit, who joins the RSS in his efforts to assimilate and identify with the goals of dominant Hindu ideology, which has historically obfuscated and marginalized Dalit identity, and later suffers rejection and exclusion. The essay argues that Meghwanshi's



account of alienation in an organization, which he sought to serve, highlights how Dalit identity and labour is appropriated to serve the cause of Hindu nationalist ideology, while continuing to treat them as polluting untouchables.

### Auto/Bio fiction

Auto/biographical fiction pushes the limits of storytelling by drawing attention to the fictionality of all stories, whether real or imagined. Interestingly, they also aspire to achieve verisimilitude by embedding in the texts and paratexts a lot of factual details to make the narrative appear closer to reality. Gitarani's *Lesiangtham* examines an experimental life writing text, Eastreine Kire's *Mari*, which memorializes the Battle of Kohima in North East India during the Second World War. While the text is a fictionalized account of Kire's aunt who witnessed war, it uses an auto diegetic narration and lets Mari tell the story in her own voice. The essay argues that Mari's 'memory work' makes the text a 'hetero-emotive site, which recounts memories not only of Mari, but collective memories of other people, and most significantly of Kohima and Naga historical past. Reinscribing memory and marginalized figures of history is also the concern of Snigdha Deka and Rohini M. Punekar's essay on Kenize Mourad's biographical fiction *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013). Based on the life of Begum Hazrat Mahal, whose significant role is overshadowed by the figure of Rani Laxmibai in the Revolt of 1857, the paper relocates her in alternative and subaltern histories, as she has been marginalized from the nationalist narratives of the Indian nation. Interrogating the popular trope of the Virangana, a female warrior, which has been appropriated by different political ideologies, the paper retrieves the role and contribution of the brave Muslim courtesan that has been relegated to margins in the dominant narratives of the nation. A hybrid form, the testimonial novel also blurs the boundary between literature and history and aims to give voice to the disenfranchised. Written as a collaboration between a 'subject' and a writer/editor, it foregrounds the ethical and methodological challenges of collaboration. My paper examines the limits and contribution of collaboration in Elena Poniatwoska's testimonial novel and how the oral life story transforms into a rich social history of Mexico from the perspective of a poor Indian peasant woman.

### Fragmented /Contingent Selves

Life writings by people who have been marginalized because of their sexual identity and experience of sexual trauma are important in restoring a sense of self which has been shattered. Kim Schoof analyses Édouard Louis' French autobiographical novel as a 'multi directional' testimony of sexual trauma rather than focusing on the convention of 'narrative coherence', which is perceived as central to establishing the ruptured self of the victim of personal and sexual trauma. The essay argues that rather than imposing the norm of narrative coherence, which is shaped in the text along sexual and racial lines, the multiple digressions and testimonies re-establish Édouard's self in solidarity with his perpetrators' sexual identity, thereby constructing a relational and fragmented self. Ipek Sahinler's insightful essay examines the 'Oriental' journeys of Cuban writer Severo Sarduy and French Pierre Loti, which are intimately linked to their self-making processes by appropriating the Ottoman practice of *tebdil-i kıyafet* (cross-dressing). The essay argues that while the journey to the East marks a move towards the self by way of negotiating sexual and national identity and formation of their neobaroque aesthetics, yet it constructs the East as the exotic 'Orient'. The metaphor of journey demonstrates self and identity formation as a constantly evolving process, always in flux. The fluidity of self emerges even more clearly in digital storytelling. Michael Humphrey and Elias Gbadamosi's paper on life stories on SubReddit elaborates on constructing contingent selves on a digital

platform which promises anonymity and liberates individuals from the confines of identity markers. Using narratives-in-interaction research method, the paper examines the possibilities of developing intimacies amongst strangers through sharing of stories, which are fundamentally fuelled by affect. The authenticity and the authorship is no longer central to the stories narrated on such platform as it can be augmented by the commentators; what remains is the anonymized experience that is as contingent as the author.

### **Tibetan Autobiography**

Lucia Galli and Rachael Griffiths exploration of Tibetan life writing moves beyond traditional approaches of examining Tibetan autobiography as historiography or hagiography and addresses the complex self-making processes when the text is located in cultural, social and political context. Lucia Galli's essay on the graphic memoir of an American Buddhist point to the difficulty of translating Tibetan Buddhist concepts of death and afterlife to an American audience, that is deeply 'other'. Comparing the individualistic and self-reliant graphic account of Samuel Bercholz's near death experiences and vivid description of hell with the traditional Tibetan Buddhist *delok's* (das log) literature's affirmation of communal experience and didactic impulse, the essay observes how the familiarity with the graphic form opens up possibilities of cultural adaptation and engagement. Moving away from the literary conventions typical of Tibetan autobiography, Rachael Griffiths' contextualizes the autobiography of Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor in the social, institutional, and political networks of Amdo (North Eastern Tibet) in the early eighteenth-century and analyses the author's self-making through his recollection of collective memories and stories that shape his subjectivity not as an individual but as a product of collective. Both the essays point to the difference between the communitarian construction of self in the non-Western context as opposed to a more individualistic assertion of self in the Western tradition.

### **Postcolonial Life Writing and Working Class Autobiography**

Meenakshi Malhotra examines *My Experiments with Truth*, the autobiography of well-known Indian political and nationalist leader MK Gandhi, in a postcolonial framework, focusing on his corporeal politics and how his gender ambivalent constructions of the self challenges the colonial models of masculinity. While Gandhi's autobiography has largely been read as a liberal humanist project of self-realization and truth telling, Malhotra's essay complicates such a reading by analysing his body politics and how it reimagines and reshapes the contours of Indian identity and subjectivity. While the autobiography of great men had value since it served as an example of good conduct to others and posited an exemplary self, the working class life writing foregrounds a communitarian identity and collective memories. Federico Piercini's comparative study of working-class autobiography of Alberto Prunetti (Italy) and Fan Yusu (China) explores the issues concerning the identities of labour globally. Focusing on the narratives of Prunetti and Yusu as collective histories than just personal memories, the essay argues that while social realism and political commitment are central to both the autobiographies, the aesthetic strategies and formal techniques employed by the texts 'hybridize' the narratives as they incorporate both fictional and non-fictional elements. While one can trace comparisons with Dalit life writing which also foregrounds collective self, Schoof's analysis focuses on movement of labour and negotiation of working class identities in the context of globalisation.

### **Literary Selves / Fictional Lives**

An interesting aspect of life writing is how it collapses the generic boundaries between fact and fiction by bending the genres to accommodate myriad ways of storytelling. The

fine line between fiction and fact becomes even more porous when we look at how creative writers use real life experiences to shape the content of their fiction just as literary techniques are used to write nonfiction. The connections between writing a life, writing fiction, and life writing are explored in the essays on creative writers. Addressing how personal experiences of creative writers flow into fiction and yet do not limit their poetic imagination, Fatima Rizvi and Chandana Dutta focus on the fictional writings of well-known Urdu writers, Qurratulain Hyder and Joginder Paul respectively and argue that their creative journey is inextricably linked to their life experiences and autobiographical elements are seamlessly woven into their fiction. Meditating on their lives through the landscape of fiction, the creative writers question the polarity between life and work, fiction and non-fiction, and representation and reality. Paul Deb's essay examines a similar concern with reference to acclaimed novelist Amit Chaudhuri, who has often been accused, that since his fiction contains people and events that are drawn from his own life, they are better thought of as memoirs, and not novels. Drawing on philosopher Stephen Mulhall's discussion of JM Coetzee, (in particular Elizabeth Costello), Deb's essay demonstrates how the commitment to the projects of literary modernism and realism which Mulhall sees in Coetzee's work helps to illuminate and understand Chaudhuri's fiction as simultaneously autobiographical and not autobiographical. Ruchi Sharma's paper on well-known Hindi writer Suryakant Tripathi Nirala draws attention to a text that occupies a liminal space between memoir/autobiography and biography. Nirala's biographical sketch of Chaturi, the shoemaker, and Kulli Bhat, a homosexual, both marginalized and underrepresented subjects in Hindi literature, provides an occasion to construct his own progressive politics and posit the author as a social reformer. Weaving their own lives into the narrative universe of their fiction and pushing fiction against its own fictionality, these writers unsettle the generic boundaries and reconfigure ways of narrating the self. Addressing the question of temporality in the works of Virginia Woolf and Jean Paul Sartre, Tais da Lacerda's essay examines how both writers saw life writing not as a product that showed a finished and ready self; rather they portrayed self as a process in the making, which revealed life as it was lived in the moment of creation. Fiction offers the possibility of presenting life in all its complexity and conveying to the reader those daily experiences that make us human.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the articles in the special issue draw attention towards the transformative possibilities of life writing as it engages with issues of representation, recuperation of identity, assertion of agency, reinscribing individual and collective memories and histories. Concomitantly, they also elaborate on the limits of life writing by focusing on the relationality of self, the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, the split between the one who writes and one who lives, and the irrecuperability of self. To understand life writing not as an exclusive literary genre but as a process of self-making and identity formation where one performs continuously through telling stories about oneself and others has been one of the key concerns of the essays in this collection. Moving beyond traditional territories and themes, this special issue adds to the existing scholarship and initiates a cross cultural and comparative perspective in life writing studies.

My heartfelt thanks to the editorial team of *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* for giving me the opportunity to edit the Special Issue, the first on the subject of life writing. It has been a pleasurable and an enriching experience.

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# One Who Stayed Back: Sunanda Shikdar's Partition Memoir *Dayamoyeer Katha*

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at a Bangla memory text by Sunanda Shikdar, *Dayamoyeer Katha*, published in 2008 to critical acclaim. The narrative centres on the writer's first ten years she spent in East Pakistan with an aunt (between 1951–61) while her family lived in West Bengal. Set in a remote village called Dighpait in East Pakistan, the text is intensely nostalgic in tone; it allows the writer to create a world of affect that is personal yet imbued with aspects of memory and identity of two communities, Hindus and Muslims. Living as a minority in East Pakistan, the writer raises several questions regarding religion and caste that critique the new nation's formation. Firmly attached to the land and the people around her, including the lower castes and Muslim field hands who work for her family, the child/narrator is able to question and critique the taboos of her society through the intricate acts of love and compassion that she learns from the people around her.

Shikdar portrays a gallery of people from her childhood who form an integral part of the village economy, buffeted by the Partition. The narrative unfolds a warm, intimate, agriculturally sustained world of harvests, village fairs, voyages by boats, *pathshalas* and playmates that the precocious girl is a part of, just as it exposes the fissures within such a society. The memoir goes against the canonical Partition narratives of exile, resettlement and rehabilitation; instead, it can be seen as a project of recovery of a way of life now irrevocably lost, yet whose memories have strong resonances and influence on issues of identity and belonging.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, Partition of India, landscape, memory, history writing, Hindu-Muslim relation in undivided Bengal

Like those birds that lay their eggs only in other species' nests, memory produces in a place that does not belong to it.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*<sup>1</sup>

The topography of dispossession and dislocation that the Partition of India in 1947 brings alive is often memorialized in Bangla by literatures of habitation that form a distinct corpus we may call landscape-memory texts. Set on a particular geographical site, these texts often explore a "sociability," marked by negotiations with the land and aspects of belonging to one's community and through relationships with another.<sup>2</sup> Within this literature, there is a group of life writings by people who did not become homeless after 1947 but who stayed back in their places: the narrative trajectory of many of these is not migration; instead, they deal with the accounts of the quotidian life of people and a place that they remember for the rest of their lives. As such, their autobiographies flow against other well-known Partition narratives of exile and homelessness. If the nation is not just a sovereign site but also "imagined communities", as Benedict Anderson suggests, what does it denote to imagine oneself *into* the nation, especially if one's location is outside its borders? As a Muslim living in India or a Hindu in Pakistan, how does one imagine one's national and notional belongingness? In what ways can identity be shaped by moving or

staying in one place? Can that place be “home” even when an identitarian history interferes to proclaim that one does not belong there? In Bengal’s partition literature, geography becomes deeply caught up in history and politics: the political consequences of being a refugee or a minority in a land that is both “active” and symbolic.<sup>3</sup> Situated within a memorialized landscape, the self remembers the ever-active past to recover (that is never complete and stable) and recreate a time and a place of belonging that would confer meaning to lives cleaved in half. Partition’s direct fallout was to make borders where none existed and to give rise to two categories of “bare life”: the “refugee” and the “minority”. When India was partitioned, many Hindus from East Pakistan stayed back, either for political reasons or they thought that the division was temporary; some had ancestral property or jobs. Scheduled caste communities like the Namasudras, with strong ties to the land, refused to move following the example of their leader Jogendra Nath Mandal who stayed back in East Pakistan till 1950.<sup>4</sup> Some exchanged properties and came to settle in one place as many others left. This continual motif of journeys, done and undone, recur in Bangla Partition literature extensively.<sup>5</sup>

This essay looks at a memoir that gives us a different account of a self that lives on the margins. Partition has aptly made clear that there are no linear histories of habitation and belonging; narratives are complicated by movements of people who move, only to come back or who do not move at all. Often, the place of the “home” where one chooses to stay becomes a “sacralized space”, a way to reclaim the land, a language and life that was shattered with 1947. The imperatives of the story of this attachment to the land subvert the way how the same land is divided and mutilated. In these life stories, the landscape and the people living in them become a “text” that confers a web of meaning to the displacement of the Partition to arrive at a shape of how the land, both natural and symbolic, helps to construct an identity implicated within and without the nation.<sup>6</sup> Partition memoirs in Bangla are replete with symbols of loss and journeys. They are agonizing representations of the deep trauma of homelessness and voyages across borders into terrains of hope and disillusionment. However, the autobiography of a journey is refashioned in a text where the protagonist does not travel at all. Sunanda Shikdar’s *Dayamoyee Katha* (Dayamoyee’s Story) is such a narrative of being deeply rooted in a place where she lives with her aunt (whom she calls Ma) as her family stays back in India after 1947.<sup>7</sup> This makes her life story remarkable on many counts. The memoir, published in 2008 to critical acclaim, creates a new kind of autobiographical mode that centres on the writer’s first ten years that she spent in East Pakistan between 1951–61. Living in a remote village in East Pakistan, her narrative is strongly contemplative in tone to transform a world of affect with aspects of memory and identity of communities, both Hindus and Muslims. The text makes visible many strands of identities and communities that are the markers of Partition’s life stories yet radically different in its episteme. Instead of an opposition between nature and nurture or artifice and simplicity, the landscape in this text is charged with the symbolism of a changing world; a world where all the old certainties are set to collapse. Yet this world is infused with a robust mythopoetic colouring through which the history of the subcontinent and especially of the Partition is to be represented. In the Western pastoral tradition, the idyllic natural world is self-absorbed, but it may point to a critique of the civilized artificial world outside. In Bangla partition memoirs, elements of the pastoral are used to recreate a history of its people. This is, however, problematized by not making it a self-sustained natural world but by the creation of a contested terrain of politics and history. In this text, the landscape is not just a sign system for historical and mythological events or a commodity; rather, the landscape is the message. Shikdar’s autobiography deals with “the ideas of *home* in the shifting invocations of a territory – an ancestral village very often, sometimes a keenly contested terrain of politics and history...an elemental, enigmatic site of nature” (Dasgupta, *The Lie of Freedom*: np).



Dayamoyee's narrative begins with the news of a death: the death of Ajom Sheikh, her Dada, who had nurtured her in childhood with an invisible bond of love and care. Her widowed aunt had employed the Muslim field-hand Ajom to look after their farmlands. Daya, also called Sunanda, grows up within the loving protection of Ajomdada who teaches her a deep connection to the land. Riding high on his shoulders, the child loves to trek along the river Bongsho and Jhinai. "I knew where by the river-bank grew the dandakulash shrub, where were the grass flowers; which village and which river-side had how many mango, jaam and jackfruit trees, I knew that too. And I knew the birthmarks on the back and chest of my Dada" (13). Right at the beginning of the autobiography, Shikdar talks of this interdependence she had experienced and learnt from a man who was the "other" in the scheme of her caste-ridden Hindu social order. In Daya's "society of inheritance" where "one's birth determines everything," caste is an essential marker; it "manifests itself as regulations on touching others, literally and figurally, in conjunction with good and bad" (Jaaware, 2019: 23). These regulations, however, have little effect on the narrator. Firmly attached to the land and the people around her, including the lower-castes and Muslims, the child questions the taboos of religion and caste through the complex acts of love and compassion that she imbibes from her world:

In our village, there was a lot of trouble around caste and its taboos. Our neighbours Nitai and Gourda were very fond of my mother and me and wanted us to go with them to visit the Kali temple at Khaguria. We set off in two boats. We would travel together, live closely, even touch each other but, we could not eat with them as they belonged to a lower caste....one day I went to their boat to play with Nitai's daughter Jyotsna. My mother warned me, 'Beware Daya, don't eat anything except fruits.' One day I ate a few fried puti fish from them. (38)

Similar interdictions also extend to the Muslim neighbours but, Daya refuses to follow the taboos of a Hindu way of life; she eats and drinks in the homes of her Muslim and Scheduled caste playmates and gets the nickname "jaikawuni" (someone who has lost her caste status). Everyone tells her that she is a child, so it is not a sin to do whatever the heart tells her. Yet Daya's freedom is encompassed by her understanding of the pain visible all around her: the pain of being different, the pain of being a Muslim ruled over by Hindu zamindars, the pain of being hungry. In this way, the idyllic world that Daya inhabits is both self-reflexive and much larger than the self-contained world of the conventional pastoral. It allows her to be more than acquainted with the humiliations of poverty and of being different. Sudhirdada, the effeminate boy of the village whose mysterious death saddens her, is a part of this universe. Daya's transgressions allow her to be at one with people with whom she shares not only food but also an ethos of life. She keeps *Roja* with Ajom; Dada, who carries her on his shoulder and who will one day sell his only cow to come and visit her in India many years later.<sup>8</sup>

Even as a child, the acts of touching people (literally and metaphorically), who are shrouded within the laws of untouchability, allows Daya to understand how her simple actions transform herself and connect her to those around her. When she comes away to India and begins a new life, she passionately evaluates the transformation those acts of unpermitted touch had wrought in her:

I am a vagabond by nature, but I love to collect seeds of fruits. I feel pain even to trim tree branches. I am happiest watching the slow growth of plants and trees. I have inherited all this from my Dada (Ajom). And my habit of reading? That was from him too. He was illiterate, but he would walk miles on an empty stomach to listen to Yedalikaka read the Koran and other books....I have also inherited his vagabond nature. I don't cling to things, I lose everything. Ajom Sheikh was a landless farmer, and his only possession was his plough and bullock. How great a vagabond was he that he could sell his only animal to come see me in India for ties of affection! (11)



In the lines above, we can see an essential marker of Daya's identity: it is not a monadic identity but deeply dependent on others whom her Hindu society would never consider equal. This bond of love negates the many interdictions and taboos practised by Hindus in Dighpait that become the cause of Muslim political assertions in the new nation. This is articulated in the text by Sobhan Ali, who tells Daya that she would one day understand this "apoghinna," this hatred, that Hindus had for Muslims, when she grew up (89). Daya's refusal to follow the social and religious taboos challenges stereotypes of Muslims and lower castes as the hateful 'Other' and creates paradigms of conceptualizing and experiencing human relations historically and spatially. Certainly, Daya's world is not idyllic, but there is an implicit understanding that the bounties of nature are to be shared with each other. When a field-hand catches a fish surreptitiously from Chand Khan's pond and is caught red-handed, Daya's aunt tells Chand, "In God's world, the fallen fruits and the fish in an open pond belong to everyone...where have you come from that you do not know this?" (53) The village is riven with caste and religious divisions, yet there is a desire for equity and justice, however fleeting, that comes as lessons from the natural world. The adivasi tribes from the Garo hills often come down to hunt for wild potatoes in the jungle next to Daya's home and they are allowed to roam the area in search of small animals like porcupines, mongoose or feral cats that are edible (55); the Hindu homestead of Daya and her aunt gives shelter to lower-caste families who were earlier employed to carry the family palanquin.

Riding high on Dada's shoulders, Daya has a particular affinity with the landscape around her; her intimacy with the flora and fauna of her land creates in her a profound intuitive ability to understand her human world as well. Every aspect of the village she will eventually leave is drawn with meticulous care, as if the trees, bushes, rivers are to be remembered with love yet never with sentimentality. The landscape is viewed with a fierce, elemental passion, as if to name and remember every tree and river will ascribe a new weight of meaning to them. Longing is the open trope of this memoir: a desire to recreate a subterranean memory of a lost childhood that will make sense of everything that comes after it. The rapport that Daya shares with her Dada is also a manifestation of this intense desire to belong. It is this hermeneutic of yearning that encloses the narrative with such a powerful trope of the lost pastoral; it creates a circle of love and compassion that the memoir constructs intelligibly. Yet unlike the conventional pastoral, Daya's world is ever-expansive in that it gestures beyond the organically connected world of people and nature; it points to the creation of a history through an ordinary life lived with freedom and an ability to value the hidden and the unknowable human self. The vastness of the self, into the knowable storytelling *shashtor* (sacred books) that Daya hears and the *mukto antyokoron* (open-mindedness) that she recognizes in Bhulipishima, a relative, is to enunciate and celebrate the selfhood that is at once layered and constructed through the impulses of imagination and action. When Bhulipishima, a widow at a young age, leaves Daya a bunch of paper and a pen, the path of this open minded connection to the world registers in no uncertain terms. When Shikdar begins to compose her autobiography, Ajomdada and Bhulipishima are the two formative poles of her consciousness (34-35).

Although extending patronage to poor Muslims and lower castes, Daya's family is a minority in East Pakistan: every day the village empties as their Hindu neighbours leave for India. The economic and social churning that Partition creates is explicitly described in the little girl's recollection:

I had understood something that nobody had ever told me. Everything around me was turbulent. Everything around me was changing very fast ..... As I grew up and learned to walk to the courtyard, I could see the house in front, Poluda's home, become a ruin overnight. They had left with utensils, piris made from jackfruit wood, sacks filled with muri and chirey, trunks and beddings tied up in mats piled high on the bullock drawn cart. (18)

The economic and social changes mark Ajom too: his sharecroppers' job is gone as his Hindu employers leave, and he now works as a field-hand in Daya's family land. The Muslims, who come to settle in Dighpait have exchanged their lands in Cooch Behar to resettle in East Pakistan. Chand Khan and Achorbhai are "ripuchi" (refugees) who find a place in Daya's narrative just as people like Yedali and Sadik who are her father's childhood friends. Shikdar presents a gallery of portrayals of her childhood, both Hindus and Muslims, bargadars, field-hands or kaamla, neighbours, zamindars, traders or peons who form an essential part of her world and the village economy. The narrative represents a warm, intimate, agriculturally sustained world of harvests, village fairs, boat rides, village schools and playmates that the precocious girl is a part of:

Big happenings seldom took place in Dighpait. There was no riot in Dighpait. The road to Dighpait was full of water bodies and rivers; between their fluid paths, the news of our village did not reach the world outside. Just as there were no riots here, nobody cared or knew how many people died in floods or famines, how many people lived on grass seeds, leaves and creepers, wild fruits and vegetables, (people who lived off the land, marginally existing were said to live sucking the earth, *mati chaitya khaiyya*) who tried to eke out a living and failed to do so; that news never reached the ears of the world. The Government did not care, nor did the landowners, who ruled over us, care for the lives and sorrows of the people (45).

However, the little girl/narrator is not untouched by the more significant events taking place around her. She waits eagerly to read the newspaper *Ittefaq* although she is often scolded for knowing so little of the written word. Daya is curious to learn about the world, if not through the word, but through observation and participation, although what she knows and understands may seem to be useless by the standards of modern capital:

I had learnt at an early age how to use the dhenki and make rice and chirey, to use the pounding stones and break lentils, and bathe the many cows and calves we had at home named Buri, Tepi, Bisshut, Shukkur, Mangal. .... although all this knowledge did not come to any use later in my life (85).

Other kinds of knowledge too would be a part of Daya's life: the names of different varieties of rice, the readings from *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the teachings of Islam, the divisions of religion and caste. When the cow Buri dies, Daya asks, "Was Buri a Muslim?" as she watches a grave being dug for her. "How good it would have been if humans too had no jaat" she ponders on hearing that Buri was an animal and did not have any! The knowledge of the self and the world intertwines in Daya's consciousness, not to give a narrow sense of herself but a realization that she lives with a "baundulepona" (a delirious madness that comes from being truly free), an eccentric creative quest for wide-open vistas and a rejection of social constrictions. Daya's knowledge also encompasses pain and separation, a realization of what it means to leave home forever and be uprooted, with the systematic destruction of the village economy earlier sustained by the rentier Hindu landowners or their Muslim service providers. The implications of the changes are not lost on her: Ajomdada has lost his *barga* because the landowning Dey family has left for India. Partition has meant a pauperization of poor Muslim *bargadars* and artisans who had lived by working on Hindu land or had depended on Hindu patronage. The new owners of the land are either the wealthy Muslims or the Hindu tradesmen like the Karmakars who buy it at throwaway prices. However, an important difference exists between them: the Hindus rent out the fields because they are too proud to be seen as agriculturists. The economic vacuum created by the Hindus is filled by the new entrants, the Muslims from West Bengal, whom the village calls refugees. Daya's aunt tells her that they were not to be compared with the Muslims of the village, *bhumiputras*, who belong to the land and are not rootless. (21) The loss of their Hindu neighbours fill the Muslims

too with great sorrow. Modinabhabi who waits for Suresh Lahiri to return home, tells Daya: “Never forget your village....Sureshdada went to Hindustan and never came back. His home is now a ruin, there the birds and the trees weep”(69). This element of *daya* or compassion suffuses this text so that “the overarching rubric of *daya* (she uses *meherbani* too) Sikdar wields like a master craftsperson in order to achieve such an effect. This particular mode of interaction—individually and collectively—surely comes from a cultural sense of cooperative mutuality, a natural form of straightforward camaraderie that springs forth and develops from actual liking of other human beings and creatures” (Chakraborty 2013: np). However, Shikdar’s “cultural sense of cooperative mutuality” encompasses a deeply equitable core that includes the natural world as well. When she sees Ajomdada at *namaz* she asks, “Dada what did you tell Allah?” Ajom Sheik answers that he has a prayer, a supplication for all those whom God has sent to live in the universe: humans, animals, insects, trees and bushes, who must be kept from harm. When the child asks him what about Hindus who pray to goddesses like Kali and Lakshmi, Ajom replies, “ There is no quarrel between Allah and Durga or Lakshmi. ...*O shob mayinshe kore*...humans do that” (12). Shikdar’s autobiography lays bare a project of recovery: a recovery of a time (*chronos*) now irrevocably lost and a mythology of togetherness (*topos*) whose script reside in her: “I am still not a Muslim, a Hindu or a Christian, probably I had never wanted to” (12). In the memoir, the recreated landscape and the people living on them are “read” and connected through a time that seems both disjointed and seamless. Daya’s experiences are in time and also within a time that is out of joint. She realizes that the time past and what the future presaged can only be held together within acts of remembrances: the difference between the *kalojira* and the *hashkhol* rice, the mango trees laden with harvest, the water bodies filled with piscian life, the differences between Hindus and Muslims are all aspects of Daya’s world but which had existed in time and are recreated through memory. Every living thing, whether it is a particular form of grass or her favourite food, is archived to create a landscape of affect: it is tangible and sensual, making it a living topography through which humans labour. The landscape is invoked with a certain epistemological appeal: it is not only a reference point to understand Partition and how it influenced people’s lives, but, also to ask the readers to read it as a world that contained the seeds of its own destruction. The larger project of this memoir is to mythologize the geography through an “evocative symbolism” (Dasgupta, *The Lie of Freedom*: np) and to weave a personal history of the Partition. The story of Madinabhabi is a case in point. From an young age, Madina was a playmate of Suresh Lahiri. The boy would sit in the courtyard to study while Madina would sit nearby to listen. They would play hide and seek, and because they brushed against each other at play, Suresh would have a bath and then go to school. Suresh’s father, Ganesh Lahiri, wanted to leave as soon as the country was partitioned (“the sky fell on our head the villagers often said”) but he had to stay because his large property took time to be disposed of. When the final date is set, Suresh asks Madina to sew him a *kantha*. Madina had wept inconsolably when she heard that the Lahiris were to leave, but she begins to stitch a quilt that she embroiders with shared childhood memories. However, before the *kantha* is finished, the Lahiris leave the village. Madina discontinues her embroidery, distraught; everyone thinks her mad as she wanders the village roads. Daya promises Madinabhabi that she will take Suresh Lahiri’s *kantha* to India if Madinabhabi can only finish it. Like the stitches of the *kantha*, the relations between Hindus and Muslims are invisible and interdependent; weaving together a sense of reliance, a syncretic tradition of living in the same land, loving the same seasons and experiencing the small joys of togetherness:

One event of great happiness in Dighpait school was the Saraswati pujo. Kanuda and Faluda were two Hindu students and all the teachers were Muslim. Still the pujo took place....the Muslim teachers and students participated with equal enthusiasm (98).

“....[W]hen we...set off on the trail of ‘social memory’ we will inevitably end up in places where...we would rather not go, places that represent a reinforcement of, rather than an escape from public tragedy,” writes Simon Schama (1995:18). Such a topography does not always gladden the eye but also recollects the pain and trauma of an event, a public tragedy. In this memoir, Dayamoyee undertakes a regimen of both remembrance and forgetfulness. Early on in her narrative, she states that she would “think that the ten years before 1961 has been erased from my memory” and “I had tried to obliterate that time from my mind” (10). It is only in 1971, with the birth of Bangladesh, that a process of recovery begins. A letter arrives from Ajomdada, and old memories resurface. When she receives the news of his death a few years later, she decides to write about her childhood and *Dayamoyeer Katha* is born.

This autobiography is history writing in the form of a memoir. Memory’s invisible grip evokes nostalgia and it is a vital ingredient of the text. The narrative alerts us to a world brimming with significance, not because it is “symbolic” but because it contains other possibilities: of being and becoming. It includes the prospect of another kind of history of the subcontinent: a history that is conjured through the age-old intimacy of its people and the pangs of hunger that knows no difference of caste or religion. Dayamoyee’s book is ultimately the history writing that was not allowed to happen: Partition brought, in one fell sweep, an end to a long syncretic tradition of closeness and inter-dependence that lived in our land. In a sense, it is an idealistic history that will always hover over the material history of animosity that Partition articulated and made visible. Dayamoyee’s memories, mobile and unmoored, bring alive the threads of a remembered history of love that was once true and real.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> I use the word “sociability” after Aniket Jaaware (2019). He states that “every moment of interacting with those people we do not know we have to find that moment’s sociability” which is “how one relates to others”. See Aniket Jaaware, *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2019), p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Schama, S. *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 3–19 posits the argument of how landscape myths have been a recurrent pattern in European civilization. Landscape is active because it is metaphorical. My view is that in partitioned Bengal, the metaphor of the landscape operates not always in reality but through memory and is often a metonymy of a fractured and partitioned country.

<sup>4</sup> Anwsha Sengupta. “Partition and Dalit Politics in Bengal: The Figure of Jogendra Nath Mandal”. In Jalil R, Saint T, and Sengupta D (eds) *Looking Back: The 1947 Partition of India 70 Years On* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2017), pp. 24–35.

<sup>5</sup> In undivided Bengal, the movement of people within the province was an accepted practice, especially during times of natural calamities or for livelihoods. In 19th century, tea gardens or jute industry workers travelled extensively with the help of the new railway lines that came up all over the province. Partition meant a new set of journeys, including those who moved in an

opposite direction or refused to move. See Himani Bannerjee, 'Wandering Through Different Spaces' in *The Trauma and the Triumph*, vol 2, (Kolkata: Stree, 2009, pp. 105–130) as well as Hasan Azizul Haq's novel, *Agunpakhi* (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Sengupta, D. *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 230–235.

<sup>7</sup> Shikdar S. *Dayamoyeer Katha* (Kolkata: Gangcheel, 2008). All translations from the Bangla text are mine. In Bangla, *katha* is both word and story, as in *kathakata*; the title plays with this double meaning so that we read the memoir as both life story and (her/his)story.

<sup>8</sup> Chakravarty P. "The Return of Daya" in <http://kafila.org/2010/29/the-return-of-daya-prasanta-chakravarty> reads the memoir as a text of 'daya'/philia inserted within the everyday: "The overarching rubric of *daya* (she uses *meherbani* too) Sikdar wields like a master craftsman in order to achieve such an effect. This particular mode of interaction—individually and collectively—surely comes from a cultural sense of cooperative mutuality, a natural form of straightforward camaraderie that springs forth and develops from actual liking of other human beings and creatures. The important idea is to *really know* another person, investing in every single social relationship or a situation with passion and investment. This is what in ancient Greece would be called *philia* (though its origin is brotherly love): when one refers to a character or disposition that falls between obsequiousness or flattery on the one hand and surliness or quarrelsomeness on the other. This form of mutuality may also lead to a self-sufficient mode of fulfilled life and act as a strong buffer against the excesses of rampant individualism/communicative interaction and a resilient provocation to the obverse ethical modes of non-engagement and surpassing detachment from our everyday political predicament."

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# Reformulating the Notion of ‘Life’ within Life Narratives through a Reading of Tek Nath Rizal’s *Nirbasan*

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KRITIKA CHETTRI

**Abstract:** This study will read Tek Nath Rizal’s memoir, *Nirbasan*, which recounts his journey from being a citizen of Bhutan to being imprisoned overnight under fabricated charges and held without trial for ten years, till eventually finding release, while simultaneously also being exiled from Bhutan. As the conditions of existence change for Rizal, it also impacts the understanding of ‘life’ within his memoir. This study will engage with Judith Butler’s argument of frames which help to qualify and ‘recognize’ lives while being prone to breakage themselves and also with Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life,’ that aids in arriving at the central question of mobility, that seeks to define life at the border. The essay will then examine how mobility as a state-imposed condition provides a conceptual framework for determining the agency of the refugee.

**Keywords:** Bhutan, Refugee, Life writing, mobility, bare life

How do we understand life narratives without considering how the idea of life itself can never have a static or universal meaning? Theories that study life narrative either from the perspective of memory or experience seem to rest on the process of self-making or self-fashioning that these forms of writing termed ‘life writing’ engage with (Smith and Watson 15–49). How do we understand the self as an agential being without engaging with the idea of life, of which the self is a part? If Judith Butler, states that it is “frames” which determine the understanding of lives, then it becomes crucial to ask as to what happens to those lives who do not fit within the frames (10)? Butler’s answer is to homogenize all lives through the shared condition of precarity (19–23). As a member of the Bhutanese Parliament and as a citizen of Bhutan, Tek Nath Rizal finds these old certainties come crashing down when he is stripped of his citizenship and exiled from the land of his birth. What happens to a life without a nation-state of one’s own? What kind of self can emerge through this experience of “bare life” (Agamben 6)? As Rizal moves from Bhutan to India to Nepal, forging solidarities in these lands, he inhabits that border zone between nations, informing his framing of the self. This study will analyse Tek Nath Rizal’s memoir *Nirbasan*, to explore the relationship between life and life writing.

## Life, Self, and the Study of Life Writing

Theories on life writing, while making a distinction between its different forms like a memoir, autobiography, biography, diary and so on, usually have established an easy congruity between life and the idea of self. George Gusford’s seminal essay, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” tries to develop the concept of an ‘inner life’ that the autobiography is supposed to lay bare. Gusford explains that the autobiography is nothing but the individual seen in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been” (Gusford 44). Stephen Spender’s reading of Rousseau’s autobiography leads him to the conclusion that though there is a desire to search for some inner life, that life is never really revealed. (Spender 122). If the idea of an



“inner life” hints at the performative aspect of autobiographies, then Udaya Kumar’s study on life writings from nineteenth-century Kerala claims that the autobiographies “rarely speak of private interiorities” (Kumar 14). Rather, these are:

Narratives of personal life, set against a background of changing times, acquired prominence and came to shape the genre’s principal features. In these texts, a narrative about one’s own life— a self narrative— became the means of documenting a world rapidly receding into the past, and for recording personal testimonies of social change. (Kumar 2)

External markers of caste and gender then become a means of framing subjectivity within these works.

### **Of Lives Outside the Frame: A Case of Bhutan**

The idea of self-fashioning through an autobiography aims to give a lot of agency to the human subject. However, theories on what life is, as demonstrated by Judith Butler, rarely invest the human with the same kind of agency. Butler gets to the heart of the question of what life is by stating that while something may be “living,” it is not always recognized as a life.” (Butler 8). In Butler’s formulation, it is certain “frames” that help one identify life as a life, as she states, “The ‘frames’ that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot (or that produce lives across a continuum of life) not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject (3).” If frames are embedded in relations of power, then Butler is quick to reveal that the frames themselves are hardly complete or invincible:

The frame that seek to contain, convey, and determine what is seen (and sometimes, for a stretch succeeds in doing precisely that) depends upon the conditions of reproducibility in order to succeed. And yet, this very reproducibility entails a constant breaking from context, which means that the “frame” does not quite contain what it conveys, but breaks apart every time it seeks to definitive organization to its content. In other words, the frame does not hold anything together in one place, but itself becomes a kind of perpetual breakage, subject to a temporal logic by which it moves from place to place. As the frame constantly breaks from its context, this self- breaking becomes part of the very definition. (Butler 10)

The example given by Butler of frames breaking is that of the circulation of photos of Guantanamo prisoners kneeling, which sparks outrage in the international sphere (Butler 11).

What happens to lives that fall outside the frame but continue to live? Butler’s solution does not rest with recognizing the frames or with creating newer ones. Rather, she puts forth her concept of precarious lives, which is about understanding the “social ontology” of existence (Butler 19). Butler is not dealing with a mere biological existence as she clarifies, “The question is not whether a given being is living or not, nor whether the being in question has the status of a ‘person’; it is rather, whether the social conditions of persistence and flourishing are or are not possible (20).” Butler’s argument about precarity dealing with the interconnectedness of lives, seems to be directed towards the onlookers who are in a position to watch wars unfold, and decide how and where affect is to be bestowed upon victims of war. This study is concerned with analysing how the shift, and break down of frames is envisioned from the perspective of the human agent subject to such changes.

What happens when frames for recognizing lives shift, when people who have been identified as citizens are suddenly regarded as the enemy of the state and transformed into refugees overnight. Moreover, how do these refugees then comprehend their own lives? What happened in Bhutan during the 1990s was similar to totalitarian regimes in various parts of the world. As ethnic nationalism took hold of Bhutan, Nepalis who inhabited southern Bhutan were stripped of their citizenship almost overnight, forcing them to become refugees who now remain scattered as migrants in various parts of the world.



Michael Hutt's socio-historical account, *Unbecoming Citizens*, traces the history of Bhutan, right from its formation, to its relationship with the Nepali population, leading to their eviction from the state in the 1990s. Hutt's history points towards the fact that the linkage between ethnicity and identity is a recent formulation within the Bhutanese state. It was in the early twentieth century that Jigme Dorje Wangchuk brought about stability into Bhutan by unifying the various clans under his leadership. The Wangchuck's did not just manage to subside factionalism between clans but also create a kind of peace with the British Empire down south in India. With the Treaty of Sinchula (1865), they had to secede large portions of the state in southern Bhutan to the British Government in India (Hutt 20-23). The land of Bhutan had been divided into the three dominant ethnic groups, "the Ngalong (Tib. sNga-slong or sNgan-lung) in the west; the Sharchop (Tib. Shar-phyogs-pa) in the east; and the Lhotshampa (Tib. lHo-mtshams-pa) in the south (4)." What is interesting to note here is that the term Lhotshampa which was often a derogatory term used for the Nepali population in Southern Bhutan, actually only means "Southern Borderlander," just as Sharchop means "Easterner (4)." Identity then is tied to one's position within the land rather than to ethnicity.

The question of linking identity with ethnicity rises with the establishment of ethnic nationalism in Bhutan. Hutt's history points out that not only did a free mobility exist between the Lhotshampas in the south of Bhutan and the northerners, but also between the Himalayan kingdoms of Bhutan and Nepal, either for trade, marriage or livelihood (Hutt 62, 27-29). Nepali migration itself dates back to the mid-eighteenth when the Gorkha kingdom levied high taxation policies upon the peasants of rural Nepal. The British requirement for labour in the tea plantations of Darjeeling and in the British forces also provided a catalyst to this emigration from Nepal (22-24). However, Hutt is quick to point out the role and importance of the Nepalis within the Bhutanese cultural matrix, "However, the demographic fact of the matter is that the section of the twentieth century population of Bhutan which has Nepali as its principal language and is still identifiably of Nepalese origin inhabits the kingdom's southern districts, where it constituted a majority when the socio-political convulsion of the late 1980s and 1990s began (31-32)." The association of Nepalis with their ethnicity meant linking them to various political movements in India and Nepal. The joining of Sikkim into the Indian Union, which was attributed to the growing Nepali population within the state, the Maoist movement in Nepal, along with the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland by Nepalis in North Bengal in India, was sufficient to plant the seeds of doubt regarding the Nepalis in Bhutan (193-197). While the Bhutanese media began framing the Nepalis as anti-national, the Bhutanese government executed its plan of evicting the Nepalis by changing the citizenship law from 1958. Thus followed the new population Census of 1988 to "identify foreigners" along with ever-changing rules and criteria for being considered a Bhutanese national (152-159). The new Census rules were explicitly targeted towards Bhutan's Nepali population, who were connected with Nepal and India through marriages as Bhutan shared a porous border with these two states. This was an attempt not only to curb such mobility but also to delegitimise the Nepali women who had married Bhutanese nationals, along with any progeny they might have had over the years (147-159). This came at the heels of the imposition of cultural homogenization in Bhutan through laws known as *Driglam Namzha*, whose purpose was to eradicate Nepali cultural identity from the Bhutanese public sphere (160-192). In the face of Lhotshampa resistance, the government issued brutal measures, which included creating a category of Nalongs (anti-nationals) for the Lotshampas (211-226). While the Bhutanese Government and newspapers claimed that emigration of Nepalis from Bhutan was voluntary, Hutt's testimonies collected from amongst the members of the refugee camp told him a different story "...up

there the King is saying ‘You mustn’t leave, you will only suffer’. It’s true that he did say that, but as soon as he left the army and police came at night and harassed and punished people and they had no choice but to leave (qtd. in Hutt 226).” In the face of torture, imprisonment, seizure of land, the Nepalis within Bhutan had no other choice but to exit the country and become refugees, many of whom lived in refugee camps in Nepal.

### The Story of Tek Nath Rizal

This history makes it evident that the concept of life can no longer remain static for the Nepalis from Bhutan when the old frames and certainties break down. The journey from being a citizen to a non-citizen has been documented by Teknath Rizal in his memoir *Nirbasan*. Rizal was an elected member of the Bhutanese parliament from the South of Bhutan, who is held under extra-judicial custody for ten years, from 1989. In 1993 charges of being an anti-national rebel leader are levied against him, after which he remains in custody awaiting trial, only to be released and simultaneously exiled from Bhutan in 1999. The memoir charts this journey of Rizal abruptly finding himself under imprisonment and ends with him becoming a refugee in Nepal. While there is a linear trajectory to the work in terms of beginning with Rizal’s imprisonment and ending with his release, it is not so easy to find the same linearity in terms of the shift in frames from being a citizen to a prisoner to a refugee. Rizal continues to hold on to his ardent belief that an audience with the Bhutanese king would solve all misunderstandings regarding him even though his lived experience within jail hints at a different reality. It is his encounter with the non-human world, the animal world, that not only provides a critique of the known human institutions but also hints at radically altering the known structures instead of finding inclusion within them.

What accompanies the loss of citizenship is violence to one’s body, one’s life. As Rizal gets held under extra-judicial custody under charges he has no idea about, this is how he recounts that journey:

After I got arrested, they kept me in hotels, guest houses, state guest houses, army messes, residences of Aagi Pempem and Varun Gurung. They kept me locked up in rooms without a bite to eat or drink during the day, while at night, I was shifted from one location to another so I would have no idea of my current location. When I think about it now, after these fifteen years have passed, I realise that it was an attempt to affect my psyche. (Rizal 97)

Rizal thus writes about the torture that he experiences in jail:

There would be nails, pieces of glass, fish bones, insects in the food served to me. I would often not eat as food would make me more unwell. They also did not allow me to meet anyone or listen to the radio or read the newspaper. In those long two years, all I could do was chant god’s name. (Rizal 111)

This makes it evident that Rizal is not tried under laws that fall within the purview of the state, but instead, he falls prey to the violence that becomes an intrinsic part of law and which gets unleashed during the ‘state of exception’ in Bhutan.

Georgia Agamben’s theory on ‘bare life’ provides a way for thinking about such life that has been discarded or disowned by the state while being subject to its relentless violence. Rather than understanding such lives in terms of the humanitarian discourse, Agamben gets to the heart of the connection between life and politics that the state of exception unravels. What is bare life, but “life exposed to death” as Agamben states, “There is no clearer way to say that the first foundation of political life is a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed (Agamben 44).” Agamben states, “Contrary to our modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens’ rights, free will, and social contract, from the point of view of sovereignty only bare life

is authentically political. (53).” What this means is that if the sovereign contains within himself the power to suspend the law, to call upon the state of exception, then this power comes from this power over death. Agamben states that “In modern biopolitics, sovereign is he who decides on the value or the non value of life as such. Life – which, with the declaration of rights, had as such been invested with the principle of sovereignty—now itself becomes the place of a sovereign decision. (70).” Later, in the context of Nazism, Agamben goes on to write about how the “biopolitical program” is actually a “thanatopolitical” one (73).

While Butler makes it clear that her idea of precarious life is very far removed from Agamben’s notion of “bare life,” as she states:

This is not the same as “bare life,” since the lives in question are not cast outside the polis in a state of radical exposure, but bound and constrained by power relations in a situation of forcible exposure. It is not the withdrawal or absence of law that produces precariousness, but the very effects of illegitimate legal coercion itself, or the exercise of state power freed from the constraints of all law. (Butler 29)

However, what Agamben seeks to decode is the idea that the *homo sacer* or the refugee is not a deviation from, or a by-product of, the modern nation-state. Rather, their existence takes us to the very heart of the connection between life and politics. Agamben’s formulation is useful to this study for his work where the bare life remains rooted within the state, displays the lack of fixity of the institutions that make up the state thereby pointing towards their mobility. Such mobility is what characterizes the sovereign himself, who is the “... the werewolf, the wolf-man of man, dwells permanently in the city,” and has the power to arbitrarily call upon the state of exception at will (Agamben 53). What this suspension does is that it imposes mobility unto the life of the refugee, whose implications on the idea of life needs to be understood, which this study aims to do through a reading of Rizal’s memoir.

The camp, then, is a profoundly political space that becomes a sort of threshold as Agamben states, “Precisely because they were lacking almost all the rights and expectations that we customarily attribute to human existence, and yet were still biologically alive, they came to be situated in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which they were no longer anything but bare life. (Agamben 78).” Rizal’s experience from being imprisoned in make shift prisons under no charges initially but just through a state of exception when law becomes violence, his journey to becoming a Bhutanese refugee, demonstrates the idea of the camp as a liminal space. The prison experience leads to a radical overhauling of his idea of the state of Bhutan and of his conception of the relationship between the citizen and a leader as he states, “But is life in jail only about recounting hardships? If I accept that, then I would be lying to the readers. This story would be incomplete if I did not include the lessons that I learnt from the unique experiences in jail. (116).” These ‘unique experiences’ that take up the central part of the memoir while also being its most noteworthy section from Rizal’s journey stems from his relationship with creatures from the animal world that he encounters while being jailed.

Rizal’s then goes on to describe the bonds forged in jail with creatures from the animal world. A horse, cow, mice, insects, frogs and dogs go on to populate the rest of the chapter, as Rizal writes about his close encounters with them. Of them, the encounter with the mice and dogs is particularly noteworthy. The interaction between Rizal and the animals allows the reader to witness a different image of the political prisoner. A different and most intimate aspect of the personal life emerges, as he decides to trick the mice who enter his room at a scheduled time, waiting for their food, which happens to be rice rolled into tiny balls by Rizal. Instead of leaving the rice balls scattered around the room, Rizal decides to tie them up with a cloth and hang them under the table. He watches as the mice scramble around, searching for food. While some eventually retreat into their hole in exasperation, he observes one mouse which not only manages to pull

the rice ball from the table but also manages to tear the cloth covering it with its teeth. He then states, "Seeing this mouse struggle and fight its way to victory was like watching an entertaining movie. For me, this was simply an experiment. But from the perspective of the hard-working mouse, this was a great event (Rizal 119-120)." Another incident narrated is that of dogs who act as his guardians. He feeds these dogs and states, "Isolated from home and family, these twenty-two dogs had become my family of sorts" (126). When the authorities came to visit the jail, the dogs scared them to such an extent that they had to return back hurriedly. After an hour or so of their return, Rizal heard gunshots outside the jail. He saw the dogs falling to their death at the hands of the same authority. He states, "After chaos, there was a kind of deathly silence. No dog was spared. I felt numb, like as if I had witnessed the death of my children" (127)."

What is the nature of the relationship that Rizal forges with the animals? Animals find a significance in Agamben's theorization of bare life as well, for the *homo sacer* represents just such a crossing of the "... zone of indistinction between the human and the animal, a werewolf, a man who is transformed into a wolf and a wolf who is transformed into a man ... (Agamben 52)" However, while Agamben emphasizes on the mobility of the *homo sacer*, he does not radically rethink the position of the animals themselves caught within this anthropocentric hierarchy. In case of Rizal's text, the animals have the ability to trespass between the world of the prison and the outside order, thereby displaying a rejection of these human categories. The animals, therefore always already embody the 'bare life' of the *homo sacer*. Derrida elaborates upon Bentham's idea of suffering and not logos which can provide a way to think about the human and animal relationship (Derrida 27). What is the significance of this connection that is forged through the ability to suffer? In case of Rizal's memoir, as these animal lives swing between the daily struggle of life and death, are we to read this connection forged between them and Rizal, simply along the plane of victimhood where all of them are subject to the cruelty of the human world? Derrida however, is looking beyond such anthropocentric concerns when he claims that this "abyssal rupture" alters the anthropocentric subjectivity that has been founded on a human and animal divide, while claiming that (Derrida 31):

Beyond the edge of the so-called human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than 'The Animal' or 'Animal Life' there is already a heterogenous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely ... a multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead, relations of organization or lack of organisation among realms that are more and more difficult to dissociate by means of the figures of the organic and inorganic, of life and/or death. These relations are at once intertwined and abyssal, and they can never be totally objectified. (Derrida 31)

Rizal's text never radically alters the anthropocentric vision as suggested by Derrida by venturing into the multiplicity of perspectives provided by animal life. However, the fact that he never explains or compares his situation with that of the animals opens a new field of visibility for the reader, who is then in a position to compare these lives. The reader is able to see that while the animals trespass human categories, so does Rizal, in his role as a refugee, move between the boundaries demarcated by the nation-states of Bhutan, India, and Nepal. What marks this mobility is not the same sense of triumph and agency that perhaps one can find in other accounts of life at the borderland, like in case of Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal work, *Borderlands*. Anzaldúa writes from her experience of belonging to a Chicana heritage in America and its impact on the psyche. While Anzaldúa begins her text by showing an understanding of the material reality of life at the border, the border soon takes on a symbolic import in her work. Anzaldúa's narrative, though arising from the psychological trauma of living with the conflicted identity of being a woman of Mexican descent within the United States, nevertheless emerges into an powerful narrative

of empowerment as Anzaldúa writes about celebrating this unique heritage of the Chicana that draws from the oral cultures of the Aztecs and Indians and from the forms of Western anthropology. She states:

These numerous possibilities leave La mestiza floundering in uncharted seas . . . In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behaviour; these habits and patterns are the, enemy within . . . She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view . . . She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa 79)

Most significantly, Anzaldúa points towards her heritage as a repository of cultures from where she has the agency to pick and choose or rather navigate between multiple identities. The problem with Anzaldúa's formulation is that it refuses to look into the material conditions of existence at the border where this celebratory agency of the mestiza is no longer available. Pablo Vila on the other hand, provides a more materialistic understanding of life at the U.S.- Mexico border. Vila's work aims to capture the anxieties, possibilities, differences that stem from the uniqueness of each border habitation, rather than reducing everything into a glorious celebration of hybridity (Vila 6).

Inhabiting the border does not just mean a chameleon-like ability to imbibe aspects from one's cultural heritage at will. Mobility, along with its threats and possibilities, defines life at the border. There is a grave threat to Rizal's life as he tries to seek refuge in India and Nepal. The governments of both these states prove hostile to Rizal as they would rather maintain diplomatic ties with Bhutan (Rizal 60, 78). Mobility allows Rizal to reformulate the notions of ethnicity as fixed by the Bhutanese state where the Nepalis are discriminated against for their ethnicity. While Rizal seeks refuge in Nepal, this is no triumphant celebration of homecoming. Rather, he records this journey in the following manner, "Now where should I go? I then thought of Nepal. Having allowed more than one lakh Bhutanese to remain within Nepal, would it have space for one more? I thought about the answer to this question and then decided to go ahead with the plan (185-6)." What does it mean to think about Bhutan from his position of being a condemned figure of Bhutan? Rizal frames his life story in terms of a linear trajectory which begins from his early years in Southern Bhutan to his imprisonment, followed by release and exile into Nepal but there is a constant amalgamation of his own story with the story of Bhutan. Thus, while he recounts the history of his childhood, he also simultaneously recounts the history of Bhutan, which challenges the official historiography of the state as belonging to one ethnic group. He says that primarily the Indian and British authors have attributed such a homogenous history to Bhutan (Rizal 43). So he focuses on a history of Bhutan tied with other nations like Tibet and hints at erstwhile easy mobility between these lands (42). He writes about the history of the Indian town of Kalimpong, which fell under Bhutan "The administration in the whole of southern Bhutan was looked after by S.T Dorjee of Kalimpong, when the British ruled over India. S.T Dorjee was appointed by the Bhutanese Government to set up a Bhutanese settlement in Kalimpong (46)." Rizal also writes about how many people continued to have houses in both Bhutan and India for an extended period, even after Kalimpong seceded to India (50)." This history, while pointing towards the arbitrariness of the current state of the Bhutanese border, becomes a means of mobilizing the spatial history of Bhutan itself. While in prison, he continues to think about the unfair judicial system of Bhutan and wonders about its reformation. When the nation is no longer available to Rizal in its materiality, reconstructing the history of the land, becomes a means for reframing the history of the self.



Mobility also allows Rizal to reframe the notion of ethnicity, framed from within the narrow confines of the nation-state. Rizal's life experiences allows him to think of solidarity as being forged not just through the idea of a shared kinship but through a shared history of suffering. Rizal warmly writes about the solidarities he develops with sympathizers in India and certain sections of the Nepali press. He writes about the plight of the Nepalis in Assam and identifies with their struggle (Rizal 77). Towards the end of the work, Rizal writes about how porous borders work in state developmental activities where cheap labour from India is used to rebuild Bhutan. He states, "These migrant labourers did not have proper living conditions in Bhutan. (172).

What such mobility then accords Rizal is an idea of the self that transcends his framing. Other's outside Bhutan, in India and Nepal, seep in to define Rizal's life story. His story crosses over into India and gets published in the Nepali newspaper from North Bengal, *Sunchari*, in 1996, which states, "Twenty- seventh March is extremely significant for Bhutan as it is the birth date of Tek Nath Rizal, a prisoner of conscience. There are very few people whose personal lives go on to inform the history of a nation (Chhetri)." The article then elaborates upon how Rizal is the leader of the Bhutanese Nepalis in their fight against the injustices wreaked upon them by this Shangrila of Bhutan. "His persona is much larger than his person as he now becomes the symbol of human rights and democracy (Chhetri)." The article then goes on to critique the leaders of the Gorkhaland movement in India and the Indian state for their apathy towards the cause of the Nepalis in Bhutan. Not just for dissonance within Bhutan, Rizal becomes a symbol that speaks against injustice, speaking for the marginalized in India and Nepal. As Judith Butler states, the framing of Rizal as a Nepali anti-national within Bhutan gets exposed as the story of his inhuman torture crosses over into India and Nepal. Thus, Rizal's story, in this fashion, also succeeds in breaking outside the frame of the memoir, as it gets circulated in other forms.

Thus, this study has sought to demonstrate how the idea of life is crucial to determining the framing of the self in Rizal's memoir. Where the meaning of life changes as drastically as it does for Rizal when he becomes a Bhutanese refugee, this study has sought to understand how these changes affect the framing of the self. If mobility as an imposed condition determines the experience of life for Rizal, then it also becomes a conceptual category that impacts the framing of the self. The self that emerges, as a result can never be a unitary, coherent self, for the very idea of an imposed physical mobility leads one to reformulate the frames of nation and ethnicity that impact the experience of life.

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# Inhabiting In-Between Spaces: Fractured Identities and Self-representation in Najat El Hachmi's Writings

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VIJAYA VENKATARAMAN

**Abstract:** This paper examines the quasi-autobiographical novel *La hija extranjera* (*The Foreign Daughter*) (2015) of Najat El Hachmi, a Spanish Moroccan writer, and argues that the fractured self portrayed in it encapsulates the experience of fractured identities and selves inhabiting in-between spaces as a result of migration. With roots in the Tamazight culture (a marginalized identity vis-a-vis the dominant Arabic in Morocco), Najat El Hachmi's unequivocal adoption of Catalan as her language enables her to articulate a severe criticism of the position of women in her culture of origin without exonerating the host society for its discrimination against migrants. In the novel, as in her essayistic writings such as *Jo també sóc catalana* (*I am Catalan, Too*) (2004) and *Siempre han parlat per nosotras* (*They have always spoken for us*) (2019), she reflects on the relationship between the self and her linguistic, cultural and gender identities. The in-between state she consciously chooses to inhabit can be seen as resulting from the process of production of identity as articulated by Stuart Hall wherein, she rejects both identities negotiating between the past and the present, the 'there' and the 'here', which are in a state of constant flux. Through an analysis of these works, this paper examines the representation of her life and that of other Moroccan women in Spain as a choice to inhabit an "in-between" space.

**Keywords:** Najat El Hachmi, self-definition, identity, in-betweenness, migration

I will no longer answer to you. From now on I will only answer to myself. To myself or whoever, but never again to those of you who only accept me if I am meek and submissive.  
(El Hachmi, *La hija* Epigraph)

The Moroccan-Spanish writer Najat El Hachmi was born in Beni Sidel, Morocco, in 1979 and moved to Spain with her family when she was eight years old. Her early years in Morocco and her adolescence in Catalonia, where she was educated, are the markers of her hybrid identity. She started writing at an early age and consciously adopted Catalan as her primary language like Asha Miró and Agnès Agboton. Najat El Hachmi achieved recognition as a writer in 2004 with her first book, *Jo també sóc catalana* (*I am Catalan, Too*). This literary memoir addresses issues relating to identity and self-definition in the context of an immigrant's position vis-a-vis the home and the host country. Her first novel entitled *L'últim patriarca* (*The Last Patriarch* 2008), received multiple prizes, including the Ramon Llull Award of 2008 and the Prix Ulysse for a debut novel in 2009, and she was a finalist for the Prix Méditerranée Étranger in 2009. *La hija extranjera* (*The Foreign Daughter*) (2015), which we will examine in this paper, is her third book. Her most recent book, *El lunes nos querrán* (*On Monday they will love us*), has won the prestigious Premio Nadal in 2021. Her other important works include the non-fiction book *Siempre han hablado por nosotras* (*They have always spoken for us*) (2019), in which she makes a scathing attack on the patriarchal values of Moroccan society and analyses how the experience of migration sometimes provides an opportunity for women to break free of the shackles of traditions.

This paper argues that El Hachmi's works can be seen as enunciatory spaces from which she articulates views on the integration of migrant people into host societies, which intersect with linguistic, cultural and gender issues. Her quasi-autobiographical writings portray fractured selves that convey the experience of fractured identities and selves occupying in-between spaces owing to migration. She writes from the position of an immigrant about her relationship with Tamazight<sup>1</sup> culture (a marginalized identity vis-à-vis the dominant Arabic in Morocco) and her position in Spanish letters due to her unequivocal adoption of Catalan language and identity.<sup>2</sup> Her writings articulate the problems of self-definition in a world increasingly complicated through migration and displacement. She creates spaces for reflection and dialogue between cultures, by way of a negotiation between the past and the present, the 'there' and the 'here', characterized as being in a state of constant flux. Her works contain recurrent tropes of feminist autobiographies like the relationship between the mother and the daughter, the theme of madness, sexuality and body, and the act of writing. Through an analysis of her quasi-autobiographical novel and other autobiographical essays, this paper explores the representation of countless immigrant women like Najat El Hachmi, who intentionally choose to inhabit an in-between space. In giving voice to the experiences of Moroccan immigrant women, highlighting the sacrifices inherent to cultural integration, she defines this in-between state not as one or the other but a third space, that allows for 'border thinking'<sup>3</sup> (2004b, 14) to emerge. As she says in a speech delivered at the Cultural Forum held in Barcelona in 2004

Eventually, you'll learn to live on the border between these two worlds, a place that can be a dividing line but which is also a place of encounter. One day you'll think yourself lucky to be able to enjoy that border, you'll think that you are more complete, more hybrid, bigger than anyone else. (2004a)

The immigrant's predicament of being caught between two worlds that work in parallel, impermeable and hierarchical ways (based on the premise that the culture of origin must be subordinated and even forgotten, in favour of the host culture) finds fictional representation in almost all her works. In her blog (<http://najatelhachmi.blogspot.com.es>), she harshly criticizes the idea of cultural mediation, which, according to her, is but a euphemism for forcing immigrants to accept the rules imposed by the host society. She describes herself as an involuntary migrant, having had no say in the family's decision to migrate but suffering the consequences, nevertheless. The two sides of the Mediterranean, the place of origin and the host culture, are for her two worlds separated by an abyss. The only way to reconcile the two is through what she defines as 'border identity', i.e., neither rejecting one's origins nor enclosing oneself in a monolithic identity, accepting the inheritance from both worlds, the new and the old. This 'border identity' is not envisaged as a merely physical one but includes a genealogy as the process of production of identity necessarily involves creating a link between the past and the present.<sup>4</sup>

*Yo también soy catalana* (*I am Catalan, too*) is Najat El Hachmi's first-person quasi-memoir replete with personal recollections about her struggles with identity, language, and motherhood. The reflections are triggered by an innocent question from her son, asking her if he too is Catalan. In the book, she critically examines her Catalan identity that she believed was completely internalized, and the discomfort she feels about her own history – a history and a past that she had not earlier identified or acknowledged. She describes the book in the Prologue as a "kind of trans-generic hybrid: a memoir that is not exactly a memoir, real-life experiences that seem fictitious and a bit of analysis of this life narrative that is not entirely an essay". (2004b 4) Thus, she engages with her relationship with her parents, her faith, concepts of nationality, and belongingness, all of which are embedded in the memories of her early childhood. The essay takes the form of an address in the second person and points to the breaks as well as continuities in the genealogical relationship

between her Moroccan ancestors and her son. Just as in her speech mentioned above, this memoir highlights the need to move beyond categorizations based on racial, ethnic or gendered prejudices, and to be able to inhabit the in-between space, which is ultimately bigger and better. Finally, for Najat El Hachmi, it is only through the act of writing that she is able to negotiate these two worlds. This is perhaps the reason why her life is reflected in her writings through the fractured selves portrayed in them. As she says

I see that, in fact, I write in order to overcome my own barriers, to navigate between my memories (and not only in this kind of autobiographical writing but there is a bit of me in all my stories). I confess: I write in order to feel free, to get out of my confinement, a confinement made up of my origin, my fears, the oft-frustrated hopes, continuous doubts, and abysses faced by pioneers who set out to explore new worlds. (2004b 4)

These fears, doubts and frustrated hopes are echoed in El Hachmi's third novel, *The Foreign Daughter* (published in Catalan under the title *La filla estrangera* in 2015). The novel is narrated in the first person by an unnamed adolescent girl, who has migrated with her mother to Catalonia as a child. Receiving her education in Spain, she struggles to straddle both worlds, trapped between her mother's Moroccan background and Muslim religious beliefs and the desire to find an independent identity for herself in the host society. The central storyline revolves around the daughter's struggles against her mother's impositions of tradition, behaviour according to the cultural and religious codes which clash with her desires. This sense of entrapment moves her to agree to a marriage of convenience respecting her mother's wishes in the false hope that this would both free her mother of responsibilities towards her and bring her the desired freedom. However, she is unable to fully reconcile the patriarchal impositions of her husband and the traditional role accorded to women, including that of wearing the headscarf. The alienation she faces in her home as well as the outside world deepens and leads to her mental breakdown. Finally, towards the end of the novel, she breaks free from her mother and husband and leaves her child behind with her mother. The narrator of *La hija extranjera* finds herself trapped between two cultural codes that are both alienating and finds release only when she decides not to belong to either of the spaces but to inhabit a third space consciously. The narrator's struggles with contraposed ideals of belonging, both to Spain and to the mother, reflect an immigrant's painful adaptations to Spanish cultural norms while trying to adhere to the traditions of her former home.

While Najat El Hachmi's articulations on identity need to be understood in the context of the complex history of immigration in Spain and Catalonia and the contentious nationalisms that operate there, our interest here lies in the way her writing, akin to that of other migrant writers, can be read from the perspective of recent studies on the intersection between autobiography and fiction, especially in women writers. The increasing interest in life-writing today can be attributed to diverse factors, but, as Gudmundsdottir notes, "autobiography – in its various guises – can capture and address many contemporary concerns, for example the status of the subject, the relations and representations of ethnicity and gender, and perhaps most importantly questions the individual's relationship with the past" (1). Even if one ignores the thorny issue of referentiality, Najat El Hachmi's novels serve as supplements to memory, an idea that is widely accepted in autobiographical studies today (Anderson, Whitlock, amongst others). This is so despite the fact that the universalization of individual experiences is done using the conventions of representation and hence, like all representations, is also 'constructed' to a large extent (Gudmundsdottir 6).

Najat El Hachmi, in her fiction, takes recourse to some of the recurrent tropes of feminist autobiography, for instance, the relationship with the mother, the reasons for choosing to write, often closely linked with breaking free from the mother, from madness, and/or

traditional female roles imposed by patriarchal models of behaviour. Feminist theories have, of course, focused on ideas on mothering and writing, and ideas about the mother and writing are strongly linked with *écriture féminine*.<sup>5</sup> Autobiography offers the possibility of liberation in some sense as it is the ultimate tool for self-representation. Telling one's story is like giving birth to oneself and is intrinsically linked to claiming agency for oneself.

In Najat El Hachmi's novel, the mother is represented as an obstacle in the path of the narrator's self-definition and accepting the mother's cultural impositions come at a high cost, of losing her mind. The restoration of mental well-being is contingent on the final separation from the mother, which then provides the opportunity for self-definition. Mental imbalance, which implies a denial of self-representation, is overcome through writing. The attempt at self-representation is complicated due to her peculiar relationship with both the languages that are markers of her identity – Tamazight, her mother's language that is the language of repression and silence for her, and Catalan, the language that she consciously adopts but which too is a source of alienation. The choice of Catalan, though rooted in the contingencies of Spanish and Catalan nationalisms, suggests a cultural identification because of the marginalization of both Tamazight and Catalan in the cultural context of Morocco and Spain. Moreover, Najat El Hachmi believes that it is precisely this position of 'in-between-ness', between two languages and cultures, that allows her to adopt a nuanced view of both. As she explains in an interview

Being in between two languages forces you to leave one and put yourself in place of the other. It makes you more compassionate, which is fundamental for any writer. Living and growing up in this situation makes you see that people have different beliefs and you learn to appreciate that and live without conflicts. (Ciuccarelli 67)

In another interview, she says

I remember having to learn Spanish on the playground, after learning Catalan in the classroom, because if we didn't speak Spanish, the other kids would make fun of us. So I ended up speaking in Spanish with my siblings. Then most of us ended up speaking in Catalan or Tamazight with our children. I speak Tamazight with my mother, Spanish with my siblings and Catalan with my children. The sociolinguistic factors change over time; there are no clear and defined patterns, but rather it happens like this. (Puiglobella)

Just as in the case of the author, for the narrator of *La hija extranjera* too, the exploration of identity is related both to the language she learns outside the home as well as to the language she speaks at home with her mother. Tamazight represents her past and her mother, whereas Catalan represents the present and the possibility of freedom in the future. This is expressed in the form of an imaginary line that is inscribed on her body, dividing her into two parts. Repeated allusions to the metaphorical lines drawn on the narrator's body throughout the novel bring into focus the idea of the irreconcilably divided self. The experience of migration as a transitory situation that changes while remaining unchanged is a reality shared by both the author and her fictional narrator.

The metaphor of translation as a back-and-forth movement between languages and cultures appears recurrently in the novel. The motif of the immigrant as a translated body, transported across cultures and languages, is conveyed through the narrator's switching between languages. Both languages, the original and the translated one, simultaneously convey a sense of belonging and its opposite, a sense of alienation. This accentuates the idea of the suspended self that consciously inhabits an in-between space. While making coffee for her mother, she reflects on her inability to find an appropriate word. She thinks to herself

Teapot is not the word, neither is coffeepot. For a moment, I remained suspended in that translation. How should one call a teapot for coffee? *Zaglasht*, *abarrad*, so nuanced and

different in our-her language, and I am not capable of finding the correspondence. Suddenly, this lexical mismatch, so insignificant, so banal, has made me remember how far away I am from her, her world, her way of seeing and understanding things. No matter how well I translate, no matter how much I try to put the words from one language into the other, I will never get it, there will always be differences. Despite this, translation continues to be a sweet distraction, a tangible way, at least, to bring closer our realities, which has been useful for me since we came here. (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 1)

The protagonist narrator's struggle to find the right word and to translate between two cultures reflects her struggle to distance herself from both cultural contexts, one that represses her and the other that fails to comprehend her. The gap between the original word and the translated one alludes to the gap which she wishes to inhabit. In this way, she recognizes the breach between the two languages and cultures. Her mother's language, rooted in orality, "flies through the air without leaving a trace" and "has remained fixed on the skin of women" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 7). She also wonders why "there is no dictionary that can translate my mother's language into the language of here, not even to any language in the world, that I know of" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 7). Her first attempt to leave her mother fails as she realizes that a deeper bond connects them both and that her mother will remain a part of her, come what may.

Only with someone who is like me, who also has a mother like mine and would have learnt this foreign tongue and would have internalized it, like me, so much so that it has become the main language of my thoughts, can I speak like this, as I often do, mixing both languages. (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 1)

On the other hand, the newly acquired language and the ability to 'think' in that language accords her a new sense of identity, one that eventually causes her detachment from her mother. She declares, "I am no longer from the language of my mother" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 7). The ability to fluently speak and think in another language completes the process of separation from her mother. With the adoption of a foreign language, she compares her teacher in school to a second mother, "because she taught me the language of this place, the language in which I now think" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 7). The narrator strategically uses Catalan as it facilitates her entry into Catalonian culture. In not choosing Castilian Spanish but Catalan, she consciously asserts a connection between both languages in terms of their marginalized position. However, the ability to 'think' like a native in Catalan is still not sufficient for her as she is unable to explain her actions to people outside the family. The people she meets in the outside world fail to comprehend her reasons for marrying or her decision to discontinue her studies or for agreeing to wear the headscarf. She says

I observe myself and I see that I would like to open up completely, although it is not necessary, so that this woman understands why I do what I do or do not, I would like her to see me fully, inside out, so that she can understand my decision. But it is impossible, I cannot explain to her who I am in one word, or even in a sentence in this unexpected conversation. (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 6)

The narrator, like the author, is critical of the condescending approach towards immigrants by individuals of the host society. Their well-meaning attempts at 'cultural integration' often ignore the needs of the people whom they address. This imposes certain expectations on immigrant women, without accounting for their cultural predicaments. For instance, the European women the narrator meets at the local centre, which runs courses for immigrant women, fail to understand her predicament. The predicament she faces is of leaving her home and family or staying with them. The narrator voices this in the following manner

But of course, the people who think like this do not stop to think of our solitude, they do not offer any alternative, they do not offer us, in exchange for our rebellion against our families,

an alternative place of refuge. Don't allow yourself to be dominated, rebel against the primitive and ancestral traditions of your people, run away from discrimination and male chauvinism. But if we cross the bridge, what awaits us on the other side? (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 17)

The split between two linguistic and cultural identities makes her a misfit in both. This feeling of unbelonging in both cultures at first is cause for anguish. As she says

Why are you surprised? This is the normal life, it is yours that doesn't fit in, you are the intruder. You, whose mother cleans their houses, and thankfully someone has accepted her despite the parting in the middle, the straight Riffian forehead and the headscarf. They have been generous enough with you, in accepting you. You don't have anything to complain about, as you speak their language as well as them or even better so much so that they almost forget where you are from or who you are. Almost. (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 1)

This is also expressed in the feeling of "being orphaned, expelled from language" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 4). Although the way she writes in Catalan "is impeccable, without a fault, all the pronouns in their place, punctuation, everything" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 14), she also finds herself missing her mother tongue, and hopes to "be able to belong to her mother without having to be different from the way she is" (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 20). However, she gradually realizes that the hybrid space she inhabits is a better one, one that would enable her to gain a better perspective of her present and the past. Separation from the mother and her cultural heritage is essential for her to acquire an independent identity. Finally, she decides to leave her home and sets out to chart her own life. In the end, there is also the recognition of the need to accept the connection with her mother and her past, as that too is an essential part of her being. The novel ends with the decision of the narrator to write her mother's story. The hybrid space that she succeeds in occupying allows her to assume a new identity, that would acknowledge her mother's without rejecting it entirely.

I would write my mother's story to recover her, to remember her and to do justice to her because all the things I thought I had forgotten, which are related to her, I carried them within me without knowing where. I would write her story so that I could separate her from mine. I would write her story, so that I could be myself without being for her, but I could also be myself without being against her". (El Hachmi, *La hija* ch 20)

The predicaments faced by the narrator of El Hachmi's novel in defining her identity resonate with the idea of what Stuart Hall defines as the production of identity. Hall argues that we need to think of identity not as an already accomplished fact but as something that is "never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). Further, for Hall, identity is not "grounded in the archaeology, but in the re-telling of the past" (224). Hence, for the narrator of Najat El Hachmi's novel, telling her story gives her the opportunity to constitute her identity through representation. Her identity is constructed through the reconstruction of her past as well as that of her mother's. Just as Hall argues, for the narrator too

[c]ultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power (225).

Hall concludes that "[c]ultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. not an essence but a positioning" (226). In the case of El Hachmi's narrator, her situation as a Moroccan immigrant in Spain with the religious and cultural connotation that it entails define her identity at the beginning of the novel. However, by re-working her connection to her mother (her past), she reconstructs a life that ends up being different from that of mother's. Her life experiences – of marrying a man in the hope of pleasing her mother and finding freedom, of being forced to do things that go against her inherent



self like wearing a headscarf and not continuing her studies, and finally an unwanted child – compel her to rethink her life and redefine her identity. By rejecting her mother and her child, she discovers a new place from which she can articulate a new identity. In the end, she writes her story constructing herself by simultaneously rejecting and owning her past and present.

The fractured selves presented in Najat El Hachmi's texts represent the fractured identities of immigrants caught between two sets of cultural contexts and nationalisms and postulate the notion of a 'border identity' that is neither one nor the other. It rejects the limitations imposed by both and simultaneously acknowledges and assumes both. On the one hand, she rejects nationalist projects that strictly align people to a nation-state or territory. On the other hand, she carefully avoids the nostalgia often felt by foreigners that clouds a critical reflection of traditions. This is an idea expressed by many "out-of-country and out-of-language writers", who experience a loss of the past but are able to sufficiently distance themselves due to their life experiences. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 12). El Hachmi's representations of immigrant lives in Catalonia remind us of Homi Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity. According to Bhabha, colonial systems contain fissures that bring about their own unravelling and reconstitution in the hybrid cultures that fuse the culture of the (dominant) colonizers with that of the (marginalized) colonized. His concept of hybridity inheres in the production of the 'new', an amalgam emergent from the pleasures of contact and translation between cultures. He writes

The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. (25)

Similarly, the lives narrated by Najat El Hachmi force open new spaces of translation that are essentially hybrid and question the politics of nationalisms. By questioning relationships across multiple categories (languages, history) and borders (Riffian, Moroccan, Catalan, and Spanish), Najat El Hachmi uses the space of her writing to reimagine how identities are produced, which require deciphering of multiple histories, languages, and realities. By drawing upon her own experience of crossing borders, Najat El Hachmi creates fiction that is deeply autobiographical. Her nuanced portrayal of the migration experience of Amazigh people in Catalonia at the end of the twentieth century reflects the complicated realities resulting from migrations and displacements. She forwards the idea of inhabiting an in-between state as an empowering position that can free the individual subject, while simultaneously calling upon the need to construct new imaginaries with place and agency for such subjects.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tamazight is a Berber language spoken in the Riffian region of Northern Morocco.

<sup>2</sup> Her novels make intertextual references to important figures of Catalan literature like Mercè Rodoreda, Montserrat Roig, Miquel Llorc, María Mercè Marçal, among others, thereby acknowledging the literary lineage she inherits.

<sup>3</sup> All citations have been taken from the Castilian Spanish translations of the books. All translations into English are mine.



- <sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the cinematic and literary representation of Moroccan immigrants in Spain and analysis of Moroccan migrant literature, see Codina (2017), Dotson-Renta (2012), Flesler (2008), Ingenschay (2011), Murray (2017), Tauchnitz and Borst (2017), Vega-Durán (2016), among others.
- <sup>5</sup> For further discussion on feminist autobiographical practices related to gender and memory, as well as discussions of autobiographies in postcolonial contexts, see Anderson (2001), Boldrini and Novak (2017), Hirsch (1981), Smith and Watson (2001), Whitlock (2015), among others.

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# Writing Lives, Re-membering History in Easterine Kire's *Mari*

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LEISANGTHEM GITARANI DEVI

**Abstract:** This paper examines Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010) as life writing, particularly as historico-biographical fiction. *Mari* foregrounds the memories of Mari and her people during the Battle of Kohima in the Naga Hills. This paper analyses how Kire pushes the boundaries of life writing and further complicates a simplistic reading of *Mari* as a *fictional* narrative. What is the centrality of narrativising (Mari's) memories of the war in (auto)-biographical manner? Can Kire's novel be read as a corrective to "official" history that finds little resonance of local participation during the war? These are some questions addressed in this paper. It also postulates how *Mari* assumes the form of hetero-emotive site – a site that memorialises and evokes memories of the tumultuous yet exciting times during the Second World War in North East India.

**Keywords:** Life-writing, memory, Battle of Kohima, Second World War, emplotment, Northeast India

*Mari* is not just Mari's story. It is the story of Kohima and its people.... Once upon a time, a war was fought here and it changed lives. The lives of those who died. And those who lived, whose loved ones never returned, the ones who had to find within themselves the strength and courage to rebuild, to forgive, to love and to celebrate life again. (Kire 2010: xii-xiii)

Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010) is not only a biographical account of Khrielievüü Mari O'Leary, the Kire's maternal aunt; it is also a historical account of the Naga community and Kohima during the Battle of Kohima (1944).<sup>1</sup> Kire foregrounds the personal struggle and resilience of Mari and her people against the onslaught of the battle between two imperial armies, the British imperial army and the Japanese imperial army. The first part of this essay provides a brief historical overview of the developments during the Second World War in the Naga Hills. The second part establishes how Kire pushes the boundaries of life writing and complicates a simplistic reading of the *fictional* narrative. The concluding part proposes how *Mari* assumes the form of hetero-emotive site – evoking others' memories of the war – be it within the Naga community or beyond, thereby instilling interests among readers to retrieve such memories and histories of one's past.

## "Britain's Greatest Battle"<sup>2</sup>

For Kire, narrating the story of Mari was inseparable from reviving the memory and experience of the Battle of Kohima which had largely remained a "forgotten battle" (Kire 2010: x). Firstly, the historiography of the battle has been primarily centred on the battlefield experiences of soldiers, with little resonance of Naga people's experiences.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the memories of the Nagas who fought and lived through those times are fading as very few who can recount the war experiences remain. Correspondingly, the prospects of textual interventions to record the historic experiences of the Naga people have dwindled. Besides the exclusion of the Naga contribution and their experience in the mainstream war narratives, the *forgetting* of the legacy of the war may have been due to the apathy towards

the battle fought on their land by foreign armies. In *Road to Kohima*, “the first comprehensive Naga narrative ... covering the full spectrum of Naga experiences of the Second World War and the Battle of Kohima”, it was revealed that the battle “had never been considered as a Naga fight by the Naga people” and neither did the Naga people consider it “as a part of their history” (Chasie and Fecitt 19).

Despite these sentiments, people who lived through those tumultuous times remember how the Naga people assisted the British Army in quelling the invading Japanese Army. Naga people volunteered and were also pressed into the services of the British Army in varying capacities: as soldiers, interpreters, scouts, informers, porters, stretch-bearers, construction workers, nurses, mechanics, and so on (Khrienuo 60–61; Chasie and Fecitt 86). The war survivors reminisce their experiences with equal enthusiasm and excitement when asked about the same.<sup>4</sup> It was a life-changing event: for young and the old, and for people and places alike. Kire informs:

Reminiscing about the war years is very common with a certain generation in Kohima. Those of us who never knew the war feel as though we have missed out on a life-changing event. Indeed, it was such for those who lived through it for Kohima was never the same again. (2010: ix)

The onset of the war and the subsequent developments in the Naga Hills tossed people's lives into a frenzy of activities and fear simultaneously. It was not just the climate of tensions and anticipation picking up momentum; “everything happened at the same time” (Kire 2010: viii). For the war generation, “the World War II and the Japanese invasion” were “the most momentous period of their lives” (viii). Kire's work foregrounds how lives were affected by the war and yet how people in the Naga Hills battled the uncertainties and perils of the war with a determination to survive. While some suffered losses, some found riches, and some even love. Kire puts:

In retrospect, there are many who continue to see the war years as the best years of their lives. It has been that romanticized. Grim? Certainly. But they were years filled with all the elements of romance: heroic deeds, the loss of lives, fear, uncertainty and deep love. (2010: ix)

Rightfully claiming a place among the historical accounts of the Second World War, Kire's *Mari* negotiates a space to include *ordinary* experiences of the local people. Before a detailed analysis of what may be called historico-biographical narrative (written in autobiographical mode) is set forth, an overview of the Battle(s) of Kohima/Imphal follows.

The Battle(s) of Kohima/Imphal was one of the “greatest battles” Britain had ever fought. The determined force of the allied powers, with significant contribution by the local populace, turned the tide of the battle against the formidable Japanese Army. The Fifteenth Army (15<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Divisions) of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) entered the Indian terrain to execute Operation U-Go under the command of Lieutenant-General Mutaguchi Renya in March 1944. The Fifteenth Army was supported by the Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Subhash Chandra Bose in this operation. Laying siege on Imphal was integral if the Japanese hold over Burma were to be reinforced and protected. Imphal, then, was the Headquarters of the IV Corps of the British Fourteenth Army (commanded by Lieutenant-General Slim). Christopher L. Kolakowski explains the strategy:

Capturing Imphal and the surrounding area would eliminate a major British base in eastern India and hopefully cause restive elements of the Indian population to revolt against British rule in a larger version of 1942's Quit India Movement. (8)

Mutaguchi intended to seize Kohima, thereby cutting off Imphal from the rest of India. In addition, he aimed to capture Dimapur, then a depot for storing supply for the British Army. Mutaguchi's calculation for success in this offensive was based on the swiftness with which this plan could be executed. He had planned to seize the British depots within

three weeks and thereafter effectively supply his army with the logistics and rations needed to seize Imphal by April 10, 1944. Lyman explains:

His plan entailed three simultaneous thrusts deep into Manipur: in the south from Tiddim, in the south-east from Tamu and the third to cut off the reinforcement route from Dimapur across the mountains at Kohima [under the command of Lieutenant-General Sato Kotoku of 31<sup>st</sup> Division of the 15<sup>th</sup> Army]. (2010: 24)

Relying on this strategy, Mutaguchi was confident of the outcome of this operation. However, what began as a highly optimistic march of the Japanese Army toward the siege of Kohima and then eventually the seizure of Imphal turned into a nightmarish and desperate struggle for survival, let alone sustain the offensive. The Battle of Kohima lasted for seventy-nine days – from April 05 to June 22, 1944. Calling it “the most desperate and bloody struggle in the entire war on the south Asian land mass,” Lyman informs the British casualties to be “around 4,000 men and the Japanese over 7,000 casualties” (88).

### In her Own Voice

*Mari* brings alive the story of Kire’s maternal aunt Mari, which she had repeatedly heard from her aunt. Kire constructs the narrative in first-person, with Mari recounting the experience of the Battle of Kohima in her own voice. Kire’s mode of storytelling in this novel is a conscious choice and a telling one. By choosing to represent Mari’s experiences in an “autodiegetic”<sup>5</sup> narrative and by “emplotting”<sup>6</sup> the historical events and personages of the wartimes in the form of a diary-novel, Kire engages in a life-writing that blurs generic norms and refuses a singular reading of the same.

Firstly, Kire positions her aunt Mari as the collaborator of her own life narrative. Kire reconstructs the story of Mari in an autodiegetic, diary-form narrative. The historical subject (Mari) then extends her interest and help in constructing the narratorial and the fictional subject through numerous story-telling sessions. Although Kire confesses that she had been writing *Mari* in her head since she was sixteen-years-old, she finally put Mari’s story into writing in 2003, when she was forty-four (2010: vii). Kire recounts she spent her

summer holidays with Mari in northern Assam, listening to her tell this story and badgering her to tell it again and again. I always knew I would write it down one day. (vii)

Kire finally reconstitutes Mari’s story from the stories she heard from her aunt during the summer vacations; from “several interviews and long-distance phone calls to get the missing details from both Mama and Mari” (vii); and from the memories Mari had inscribed in the diary had recorded during the war years. Kire confesses having read Mari’s diary “a hundred times” (vii). Kire took seven long years in reconstructing Mari’s story as a novel, “trying to flesh it out with more details” with Mari’s help (vii).

In *Autobiographies of Others*, Lucia Boldrini observes that several novels, published since the mid twentieth century, are “presented as if they are autobiographies of historical personages— novels that gesture towards historical factuality and literary fictionality, towards ‘truth’ and invention” (1). Such an exercise of writing someone else’s autobiography

can become a powerful literary and intellectual tool to reflect on cultural, historical and philosophical constructions of the human ... on the relationships of power that define the subject socially and legally; of the ethics of the voice and the ethical implications of literary practices of representation; and, therefore, also on the social, political and cultural role of the literary writer. (Boldrini 6)

In this life-writing, Kire not only pushes the genre of (auto)biography; she also foregrounds a crucial site of critical discourse by subverting the *appropriateness* of (auto)biographical subject and by writing a history for her people (in relation to “official” historiography and

mainstream narratives). Conventional (auto)biographical writing considers a person of national importance or public significance to be its fitting subject. Georg Misch postulates that autobiographies are not only “representations of individual personalities” but are also the “representative of their period” (12). However, not all autobiographies *may* claim the “representative” status. Only autobiographies “by a person of exceptional calibre” and by “an eminent person who has himself played a part in the forming of the spirit of his time” qualify to be representative of its own times (13). Taking into consideration such a prescriptive norm, the (auto)biographical subject of *Mari* neither claims an “exceptional calibre” nor a status of eminence. If anything, *Mari* represents every woman who suffered losses and displacement, and who struggled for basic amenities such as food and shelter during the war.

Secondly, by writing down *Mari*'s life experience in the form of a diary, Kire kept this life-writing as close as possible to its historical subject and its archival source. The diary form in which the novel is written may be explained as a form of “remediation” (Erl 2008: 393). This process requires the insertion of personal and public documents such as “letters, newspaper articles, and drawings made on the spot” into cultural productions, “thus endowing these later media with the atmosphere of experientiality and authenticity” and often leading to the blurring of the “boundaries between documentary material and fictional reenactment” (Erl 2008: 393). At another level, by inserting *Mari*'s diary in this novel, Kire gives voice to and registers the experiences of an ordinary Naga woman in the history of the Second World War that has more often than not memorialised male accomplishments.

Kire's *Mari* may be a fictionalisation of *Mari*'s experiences through the war years and beyond: finding love and losing the same at the same time; of childhood lost and re-assembling her life as she becomes a mother; of finding new preoccupations and life as she becomes a nurse; finding love again with Patrick in their marriage; and finally retiring in the hills of her home. The fictionality of this narrative is, however, undermined by its historical referentiality – both in terms of life/historical events as well as personages. Kire, in this way, engages in a life-writing which, at one level, poses as the (auto)biographical account of *Mari*; and which, at another level, underscores the historicity of the events emplotted.

*Mari* serves as a mediating narrative between the oral form of remembering the war and the rigidities of history writing as a discipline. For a community that had been drawing upon the rich oral culture for its identity and continuity, Kire's storytelling plays a crucial role in providing a conduit for this memory to be realised in a form – from the abstract to the literalised – that shall remain with the posterity.

### Emplotting the Battle, Literalising Memories

As mentioned earlier, Kire's *Mari* defies easy generic identification, calling into question any suggestion of *fictionality* this narrative might suggest. By emplotting the battle into *Mari*'s life narrative, Kire heightens the historical referentiality of the events recorded in this novel.

Emplotment is the “the process of exclusion, stress, and subordination” of historical events in “constituting a story of a particular kind” (White 1973: 6) – a process which White likens to the emplotment of a fictional narrative (1978: 84). While White's observation on the similarity of history and fiction – as far as history as “verbal artifacts” is concerned – remains contested,<sup>7</sup> the act of inclusion/exclusion, “suppression or subordination” – which more often than not is determined by the historian's subject position – remains uncontested. History writing of the Battle of Kohima has been marked by a similar inclusion/exclusion, with hitherto existing historical accounts primarily focusing on the military, combative aspects of the battle. Kire exercises similar act of inclusion/exclusion in this book. Only this time, she includes the experiences, not of the battlefield (or of the soldiers, or military strategies) but of quotidian spaces and struggles and of ordinary people.



Mari's experience of the war is not an uncommon one. Displacement from their own homes, the threat to their lives, foraging for food, keeping oneself alive, and mourning the dead is a collective memory that war survivors draw from. This novel brings alive the small courage people had to muster in the face of the threatening sounds of gunfire and shelling. With every bombing, they hoped for their survival in the next moment even as they tried taking refuge in whatever shelter they could get. Mari recalls:

All day long we heard the sound of shelling and mortar-fire and we knew the war in Kohima had not ended. We felt even more unhappy to think we were spending this time in the woods, without proper food, and in the dangerous situation the war posed for all of us. When would the war end? When could we go home? (Kire 2010: 68)

Such moments are just glimpses of the struggle for survival and the longing for *home* in the face of death. In its most outward form, this novel presents a fictional account of war experiences – with a plot, characters, challenges and action, and finally resolution. Yet, the emplotted historical realities in this narrative problematise a more complicit reading of this novel as fictional. Rather, as the “author” of this life-writing, Kire seems to intensify the “autobiographical pact”<sup>8</sup> by drawing connections between the textual and extra-textual worlds. She not only casts real-life persons<sup>9</sup> (in their own names); she also supplies extra-textual information in literalising the memories and yet calling this narrative “the book” (2010: Acknowledgements). Such devices disorient any affirmative approach to this narrative as a fictional one.

As far as the factuality of fiction is concerned – irrespective of their different conceptualisation of “emplotment”<sup>10</sup> – both Paul Ricouer and Dorrit Cohn concur with each other on the *nonreferentiality* of fictional narratives. According to Ricouer, fiction can lay no claim to referentiality and relates to it as “an antonym to historical narrative” (64). Similarly, historical narrative, according to Cohn, is supported by a “stratum of testimonial evidence” in the form of “the presence of an entire ‘perigraphic’ apparatus (foot-or end-noted, prefatory or appended),” whereas fictional narrative cannot establish any correspondence with such “testimonial stratum” (115). The only concession given, perhaps, is to “historical novels” with its “referential apparatus, usually in the form of an afterword” (115).

For a community whose history of the wartimes had been transmitted in the form of memory and materials from the past, drawing connections between the events emplotted in the novel and the textual content is indeed very crucial. This novel not only establishes a continuity in transmitting the memory of the wartimes; it also positions itself as a written record of both significant events and everyday realities during the wartimes. Kire reminisces:

The nature of the war as it affected the Naga Hills was very different from anywhere else – that is what we were told in the post-war years.

Growing up in the 1960s, we played soldiers in my father's garden in Mission Compound where the wartime trenches had been left as they were....

In the 1960s, many households used British ammunition boxes as baking ovens.... By the 70s, electric ovens had replaced the ammunition boxes and no one seems to have thought they should have kept the ammo boxes for museum purposes.

In the Naga Hills, the war has stayed with us for many years after it was over. No Naga family is without its personal wartime story tell. (2020: Introduction 9)

Even as I resist correlating the characters and events with the “stratum of testimonial evidence” that marks a historical narrative (Cohn 115), one cannot ignore the stark historical realities interlaced in Mari's memory. In early 1942, Mari reports the sightings of Dakotas in the skies of Kohima; by the middle of the year, convoys of British Army began to enter the Naga hills; and by March 1943, refugees from Burma poured into Kohima, “starving, diseased dregs of humanity” (Kire 2010: 14–15, 17). A year later, in March 1944, the



"Japanese army were just days away from Kohima" (45). The new development called for immediate actions, often with personal consequences:

Since Father was a treasury officer in the district commissioner's office, he had to leave quickly for Shillong, carrying important documents and money. Most of the officers of the British army were ordered to Dimapur. (45)

On March 29, 1944, Kohima was left practically to defend itself due to what Robert Lyman calls "a serious error of judgment" made by Lieutenant-General Montagu Stopford. Dimapur being the British depot, Stopford assumed Dimapur to be the Japanese target and "ordered Ranking to withdraw 161st Brigade from Kohima immediately" (2010: 36).

When the male protectors (the soldiers) and Mari's father were summoned to another station, Victor, Mari's fiancé, moved into Mari's house. Victor's presence reassured her and her family even as the imminent invasion by the Japanese army threatened the town. With the army's withdrawal, both non-Naga traders and the locals fled to places of safety, thus leaving Kohima "like a ghost town" (Kire 2010: 45). Mari informs how Kohima was "no longer safe for civilians" (46). It was attacked by the Japanese Army on April 04, 1944, sending the "whole of Kohima ablaze" and "covered with thick black smoke" (Kire 56). Mari and her people fled to Chieswema, and then later to encampments like Chüzie and Biaku and through woods and rivers till they reached Dimapur. All the while, their encounters with the Japanese soldiers have only confirmed the "ruthlessness" they had heard about (61). Amid the clash between the two imperial armies, Mari shares her feeling of persecution and how she "felt there was no place ... safe" (68).

Seeing Kohima burn at the hands of the "enemy" and seeing the vulnerability of the remaining British soldiers, there was collective dismay. While some men derived hope knowing that despite the British Army being "routed from every direction," Garrison Hill, Jotsoma and Zubza continued to be defended by the army; others lost hope. They felt "abandoned by the British and left at the mercy of the enemy" (Kire 2010: 76).

The fears and apprehensions of the people highlighted the divided attitude of the people towards the ongoing battle, particularly towards the British. Even as some Nagas volunteered themselves towards the cause of winning the fight against the Japanese, some cast aspersions on the British Army. Against this tide of collective despair, Mari held on to her hope that "the British forces were still there, fighting and defending Kohima" (76). However, she had her moments of doubts, like many others. Mari recounts:

It broke our spirits to see these soldiers [wounded and borne away in stretcher]. In all our years under British rule we had always looked upon the British army as invincible. How powerful the Japanese must be if they could inflict such terror upon the British. (80)

Yet, Mari's faith in the British, which had been earlier shaken by men who doubted the British intent, was restored when she was informed that "the British army never left Kohima. They are still there, fighting for every bit of land" (81). Chasie and Fecitt inform that the withdrawal of the 161<sup>st</sup> Brigade army upon the command of Stopford

almost cost the British the loyalty of the Nagas.... Luckily for the British and Allied Forces the unflinching stand of the then Deputy Commissioner, C.R. Pawsey, not to abandon Kohima and "his Nagas," earned the loyalty of the people and saved the day for the British because all the "dobashis" [interpreters] decided to stay with him. (55)

Charles Pawsey not only remained with the Nagas even as the Japanese Army's threat became insurmountable, but he also held them together. In turn, Pawsey punished those who abandoned Kohima at its worst times:

The Marwaris ... were not allowed to return to trade in Kohima. Mr Pawsey had cancelled their permit. The reason he cited was that they had abandoned Kohima during the war, unlike the Bengali traders who had stayed on. (Kire 2010: 110)

Most Nagas extended their steadfast loyalty to the British Army and “wanted the British to win the war and chase the Japanese” out of their land (84). Such support for the British offers a counternarrative to the relationship between the British and the “mainland” India. Even as the resistance against the British was at its height by the 1940s, the Nagas in the North-East Frontier Region, a territory of the then British India, extended their allegiance more to the British than they did to their Indian counterparts.

*Mari* indicates the postwar developments that would heighten the resentment of the Nagas towards the Indian government. Countering the post-independent mainstream narrative that positions the Naga nationalists as anti-state, militant forces, *Mari* presents the rule of force which sought to suppress the Nagas. Mari shares the angst in

letters from home ... full of the tense situation and about the Indian army's killing of many Nagas who were fighting for independence from India. (2010: 143)

Mari, who was then working in Digboi (Assam), could not help being reminded of the ravages of the war that had concluded a decade back, wondering “if it [Naga-Indian army conflict] was as bad as that or worse” (2010: 144). Kire probes the postwar questions further in a more nuanced manner in *A Respectable Woman* (2019) – juxtaposing the memories of the Second World War experience and the present realities of the relationship between the Indian Government and the Naga nationalists. Similar to *Mari*, Kire's *A Respectable Woman* emplots the past and the present of Naga people and Kohima in the storytelling by Azuo, the narrator's mother. Memories of a haunting past intertwine with the realities of present-day Nagaland; these memories present an insider's account of the past, which not only informs but also shapes the present.

By engaging with the memories of the battle and its *aftermath* on the one hand, and with the post-war/post-independence conflicts on the other hand, Kire foregrounds important questions about how events have gone down in “history,” both in the sense of history as the past and as the written account. Kire seems to represent a corrective, alternative history to the one constructed from a dominant perspective.

The eponymous character of *Mari* takes the readers to the war-ridden Naga Hills by opening up closely-held memories of the past. At the same time, these personal memories became the premise of the revisionist history writing by Kire – one in which the struggle and the realities of the Naga people are included. *Mari* underscores the historical significance of not only the times Mari lived in; it also highlights the significance of this narrative as a revised history. In literalising Mari's life, the history of the community and the place took centrestage. Alan Robinson argues that a historical fiction

rewrites the historical record by inserting into past actuality figures or events whose existence is fictitious or at least undocumented. But it has generally remained within the parameters of known historical facts and outcomes. (Robinson 30)

By transforming the generic convention of historical novel to the use of constructing a historico-biographical narrative, Kire evokes and interweaves memories to re-construct the history of the “forgotten war.”

### **Kire's *Mari* as a hetero-emotive site**

*Mari* holds the memory of not only Mari but also of the land and the people. It occupies an important place in evoking the collective memory of the Naga people. Kire could not have plotted this novel from her imagination. The shared spatio-temporal experiences of the people enabled the re-constitution of Kohima of the 1940s in integrating ways. As Maurice Halbwachs insightfully comments:

A remembrance is gained not merely by reconstituting the image of a past event a piece at a time. That reconstruction must start from shared data or conceptions. These are present in our mind as well as theirs, because they are continually being passed back and forth. (31)

With memories of the war dwindling; and with the spaces and remnants of objects from the bygone years diminishing, there had to be a narrative of literalised memories. For, “literature succeeds where history fails,” as literalised memory-narratives can best re-imagine the circumstances that history presents without much involvement of human elements; these literalised memories are crucial in evoking identification among survivors and familiarity among those who inherit these memories secondarily (Weissman 104). During the research work for chronicling *The Road to Kohima* (2019), the study team found

that many of the veterans and elders interviewed were already old and many were infirm.... Two things made us sad. Many Naga families did not even have a photograph of their fathers or grandfathers who fought in the war.... The second was the realization that in many cases there had been a breakdown in family communication. Children had no idea of what their fathers or grandfathers did and, in some cases, learnt with us as we interviewed the veterans. (19)

If Naga veterans' bravery during the war are barely remembered, *ordinary* women's experiences and memories certainly would have been consigned to a permanent forgetfulness had it not been for Kire's initiative to record the same. Given the perils of dying memory and the scarcity of written history of the wartimes, Kire exhorts:

You have to use what I call 'living books of history.' I interviewed many survivors and used their memories and recorded the history they carry with them. (Kolachalam)

This book, therefore, takes the form of “hetero-emotive” site – a site wherein memories confluence and coalesce. These are memories of not just Mari, of not just Kire's mother, but also of others; memories of not just the forces of the war but also the memories of Kohima, which today has least resemblance with its former self. Mari writes in the 1980s:

Kohima in the late eighties was very different from the Kohima of the fifties. It was overpopulated and no longer peaceful. The conflict [Naga-India] was still going on and it affected our daily lives. (163)

Pierre Nora propounds the inevitability of constructing “*lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory” where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself” as “*milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory” are no longer extant (7). Paradoxically, these sites of memories are built to remind people to re-member the memories associated with a particular place or event. As hetero-emotive site, *Mari* serves to invoke readers to respond to the text and relate to the memory of the war in whatever possible ways. *Mari* has indeed drawn the interests of several young scholars from Nagaland and beyond, and the interests of people who share similar inheritances of the past. Lyman notes in the Foreword to *The Road to Kohima*:

The joint authors ... have undertaken a notable piece of scholarship, following on work by Naga historians such as Easterine Kire in *Mari* ... in bringing the voices of the hitherto unheard to our attention. (2020: 7)

Mari frames this narrative, given the dwindling memories, to do half the job Halbwachs outlines in the production of collective memory. When Kire's aunt Mari, her mother and others who had experienced the war recounted the stories of those years, it had a tangible and emotive impact on her: “It was as though an entire lost era was unfolding slowly before my eyes” (Kire viii). Kire laments:

Those times may have long gone; the old Kohima and those houses that stood on the hills may have long gone, but the mental contours of the town and the houses are all that remain. “Memories are all that remain.” (ix)

Analysing memory novels as the “lieux de mémoire” in the context of Mari’s novels, Sarkar and Gaur postulate:

Not only the Naga readers, but also the readers of Northeast Anglophone literature can draw their ideas and mental images about the Naga historical past after reading these memory novels [*Mari* and *A Respectable Woman*], which create a referential framework of remembering. (9)

This “referential framework of remembering” may therefore initiate not only an identification of similar shared experiences and pasts but also offer new modes of looking at one’s past or writings about them.

Astrid Erll rightly terms literature as a “memorial medium” that is instrumental in sustaining the collective memory of the past (2016: 112). While the Kohima War Cemetery stands proud as the “monument of a nobler time” (Kire 2010: xiii) and a fitting tribute to the memory of the slain soldiers, Kire’s *Mari* memorialises the *ordinary* courage and the lives lost during the war. *Mari* as a cultural product assumes a hetero-emotive site that calls for people to re-member and relate to the wartime experiences, even though they may not be the immediate inheritors of those memories.

Such memorialisation resonates – although from an unrelated context – Toni Morrison’s powerful evocation of the unacknowledged lives (and deaths) and memories of millions of African slaves in America. Morrison narrativises the brutalising experience of slavery in *Beloved* (1987) as a memorial to the millions of African lives lost to the making of America. Morrison, in a conversation with *The World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* (1988), claims:

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby.... And because such a place does not exist (that I know of), the book [*Beloved*] had to. (44)

Along these lines: as there exists no memorial to commemorate the life and death of Naga people during the war, *Mari* “had to.”

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Battle of Kohima was fought in the Naga Hills in 1944 in simultaneity with the Battle of Imphal in Manipur. This twin battle became one of the fiercest and decisive battles fought during the Second World War in China-Burma-India theatre.

<sup>2</sup> In April 2013, the National Army Museum, England, adjudged the Battle of Imphal/Kohima as “Britain’s greatest battle,” see MacSwan.

<sup>3</sup> Some notable memoirs by former soldiers and military histories that recount the battles of Imphal and Kohima and the Burma campaign include Field-Marshal Viscount William Slim’s *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (1956); C.E. Lucas Phillips’ *Springboard to Victory: The Burma Campaign and the Battle for Kohima* (1966); Arthur Swinson’s *Kohima: The Story of the Greatest Battle Ever Fought* (1966); Louis Allen’s *Burma: The Longest War 1941-45*

- (1984); John Colvin's *Not Ordinary Men: The Story of the Battle of Kohima* (1994); D. D. Rooney's *Burma Victory: Imphal and Kohima March 1944 to May 1945* (2000); Mike Lowry's *Fighting through to Kohima: A Memoir of War in India and Burma* (2003); Jon Latimer's *Burma: The Forgotten War* (2004); Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper's *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (2005); Leslie Edwards' *Kohima: The Furthest Battle: The Story of the Japanese Invasion of India in 1944 and the 'British-Indian Thermopylae'* (2009); William Fowler's *We Gave Our Today: Burma 1941–1945* (2009); Robert Lyman's *Kohima 1944: The Battle that Saved India* (2010); Fergal Keane's *Road of bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944* (2010)
- <sup>4</sup> In 2018, I interacted with several women and men from Manipur who survived the war and made them recount the war days for my project entitled “How Women Remember War: Unearthing Memories of the Second World War in Manipur,” funded as part of the Zubaan–Sasakawa Peace Foundation Grants for Young Researchers from the Northeast (2018). Several oral tellers recalled their wartime experiences with gusto and nostalgia.
- <sup>5</sup> Gérard Genette defines “autodiegetic” narrative as the one where “the narrator is the hero of his narrative” (245).
- <sup>6</sup> I shall be discussing the concept of emplotment in the following section.
- <sup>7</sup> Dorrit Cohn questions Hayden White's conflation of *fiction* and narrative as problematic. Cohn finds White to be one of the most “influential protagonist” of the theory that propounds the indistinguishability of historical narratives and fiction, see Cohn 8.
- <sup>8</sup> Philippe Lejeune describes the “autobiographical pact” as the agreement between the author – based on the unwritten “pledge of responsibility of a *real person*” by the virtue that he is the only one “straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text” – and the reader (11). This pact assures that there is an actual correspondence or “*resemblance*” of identity between the author, “the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about” (11–13).
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Pawsey, the District Commissioner of Kohima; Reverend Supplee, the American Missionary; Neilhouzhü, the first Naga doctor; and Lhuviniu Lungalang, one of the first Naga graduates are some of the distinguished historical personages who figure in this narrative.
- <sup>10</sup> Paul Ricouer identifies emplotment – “the organization of the events” – as a paradigm common to both historical and fictional narrative, see Ricouer 34. Whereas, Dorrit Cohn defines emplotment as a process which is applicable only for history writing and not for fictions, see Cohn 114.

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# Re-imagining a Muslim Courtesan as a Virangana vis-a-vis Kenize Mourad's *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013)

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**Abstract:** Life histories of historical figures are often complemented by fiction based on these lives. Such narratives form contributing strands to the idea of the Indian nation. A gendered figure whose life stories have been an integral part of identity politics is the Virangana. As a warrior woman personifying the nation, the figure of the Virangana is reiterated time after time to serve different political ideologies. Subaltern narratives have often been overlooked in the dominant construction of identities. Begum Hazrat Mahal, a contemporary of Lakshmibai and a significant part of the 1857 Revolt, finds meagre documentation.

The paper will attempt to excavate the historical narratives of the Begum from the marginalized archives, to study Kenize Mourad's novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013). It will question the making of the nationalist narrative in which a Muslim courtesan has little place. It will interrogate the popular trope of the Virangana, and include an unconventional Muslim courtesan as a feminist symbol.

**Keywords:** Muslim courtesan, woman in politics, identity politics, re-imagining lives, Virangana.

The field of life writing is multidisciplinary, and it includes different kinds of narratives ranging from biography, autobiography, diaries, memoirs, case histories, letters, biographical and historical fiction. These narratives work not only as testimonies of individual lives, but also represent the historical background of the lives narrated. Biographical fiction, as a form of life writing, is fictionalized re-telling of historical figures. The lines between history and fiction are often blurred since both are pivoted on the narration of events and people involved in these. Also, since both history and fiction play a significant role in the making of the idea of the nation, they may undergo policing by hegemonic power structures. The idea of the Indian nation is thus constructed upon archives of narratives, comprising ones both sanctioned and, or marginalized by the hegemonic structure. One has to therefore understand the layered construction of the underpinning narratives in order to appreciate the meaning of the Indian nation.

Secondly, conforming to stereotypical ideas of nations, the Indian nation is seen in gendered terms. The figure of the Virangana is an example of one such construct. While the Virangana has been a part of the Indian cultural memory since ancient times, it gained renewed resonance during the anti-colonial national movement of 1857. Rani Lakshmibai, the historical Brahmin queen, is an iconic figure who has become an emblem of this Revolt, and can be considered as the most well-known Virangana.

Lives of many other female heroes, however, are not narrated as Virangana in the dominant discourse of the Indian nation. The Muslim courtesan is one such figure. This paper will focus on Begum Hazrat Mahal as a representative of the courtesan figure, and will consider her as the re-imagined trope of the Virangana. Through a discussion of Kenize Mourad's biographical novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* the paper will explore

the courtesan's involvement in the Revolt of 1857. It will also attempt to retrieve this courtesan's figure from contemporary obscurity. Hence, the paper attempts to reimagine the figure of the ideal Virangana through a process of relocating Hazrat Mahal in alternative and subaltern histories.

The first section of the paper is a general discussion on the socio-political constructs of gender and nation. The second section examines the Virangana as a signifier of the Indian nation while the third section looks at the social, cultural and political roles played by courtesans. The last focuses on Mourad's novel and views Hazrat Mahal as a reimaged Virangana in the broad context of anti-colonial nationalism.

### Gender and Nation

Influenced by the rhetoric of tradition, nationalist narratives tend to picture the nation symbolically as a wife, a mother and a goddess. These constructs of nation and nationalism tend to be masculine, patriarchal and heterosexual. Subordinate groups like women are objectified and are likely to be victimized. Elleke Boehmer suggests that the patriarchal bourgeois family underpins the idea of the gendered nation. Most male theorists have defined the nation as a "male terrain, a masculine enterprise" (22-23; Julia Kristeva; Elisabeth List). Constructed as male typography, the nation is figuratively associated with female bodies. Women are associated with the "honour" of a nation's men. Thus, sexual violence is inflicted on women to defile the "honour" of the nation and this, in turn, gives rise to the need to control and regulate women's sexuality within the group. While the woman's body is conceived as a symbolic site to reproduce and sustain the myths of a nation, the same physical body is violated to defeat the "Other". Male leaders control Home/Nation, and women are expected to stay within the private sphere with little agency of their own. Nationalism thus emerges vis-à-vis a contest between the men of a nation over the control of "their" women. It is paradoxical that although the woman embodies the nation, in reality, the same hegemonic heterosexual, patriarchal structure treats her as a submissive and passive object (Menon 56, Mostov 90). Nira Yuval-Davis states how "the burden of representation" falls on the nation's women "as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively" (26, 45; Bagchi 65). Metaphors and myths that make up dominant nationalist narratives sustain the image of the pliant and commodified woman.

A favoured gendered allegory representing the Indian nation is the figure of the Virangana. This female figure has its cultural origin in the myths of warriors and mother goddesses in Indian society. However, not all warrior women who existed in Indian history are equally famous as Viranganas. A few alternative narratives of female warrior figures from the marginal sections of the society are available in circulation. These narratives, challenging the dominant discourse, have gathered visibility in recent decades. The figure of the Virangana, is thus, a complex one with layers of ideas woven into it—nation and nationalism, myths and history, masculinity and femininity and, the Virangana's dominant and marginalized representations.

Twentieth-century nationalism saw the emergence of a new female Hindu deity, Bharatmata or Mother India. In continuation with the age-old pre-Aryan cult of mother goddesses as protectors of devotees, the Bharatmata cult also assimilates the idea of the earth as a goddess and symbolizes the nation as a mother goddess. Conceptually, though Bharatmata has no male consort, her protectors are her sons: the men of the nation. As products of the hegemonic Hindu patriarchal structure, the traditions and myths about the goddess are selectively used as part of the nation-building process, thus repressing several other non-dominant myths.

### Viranganas as Signifiers of the Nation

The female warrior figures in Indian history are associated with the cult of Bharatmata and with the myths of goddesses of the broader Hindu tradition. These heroic female characters have been represented as dominant Hindu goddesses or the mother goddess in nationalist narratives since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Such heroic women came to be known as Viranganas. Etymologically, the term Virangana connotes a woman who displays qualities of *viryam* or heroism. Although this term is borrowed from the capacious repository of Hindu tropes and texts, it is used in the context of a warrior woman fighting for her nation. She is neither entirely a quintessential chaste wife nor is she the archetypal dangerous, all-powerful goddess. Sumathi Ramaswamy states that a Virangana is primarily a woman warrior described in patriarchal language as one possessing the qualities of *viryam* or male heroism (347). Hence, although a woman warrior at a particular point in history manifested her physical strength and power to fight for her nation, she is pushed under the masculine umbrella of male freedom fighters.

Kathryn Hansen lists the qualities which a Virangana is supposed to portray. She is a “valiant fighter,” peace-maker, one who “adopts male attire” and “the symbols of male status and authority” like sword-fighting and horse-riding. Most of all, she is dedicated to virtue, wisdom, and the defence of her people (26). During the anti-colonial nationalist movement, the image of the Virangana evoked nationalist sentiments amongst all Indians; it brought together different identities into one cohesive unit against the colonial power.

However, the idea of India as one nation represented by the figure of Virangana did not develop until the late nineteenth century. The Revolt of 1857 catalyzed the concept of the Indian nation as large sections of the Indian population fought against one common enemy, the British East India Company (EIC). The Indian women who fought in the Revolt were not addressed as Viranganas at this historical juncture. The term came into use later in the context of the development of Hindu nationalism. The term is now deployed to represent a woman in Indian history who offered either active or passive resistance against foreign dominion to safeguard her nation.

Not all historical female figures resisted the British government. All of them did not necessarily fight for the Indian nation. The several kingdoms to which they belonged, represented their idea of the nation. It was only during and after the Revolt, in the wake of the development of modern ideas of nation and nationalism that these historical female figures were seen as Viranganas. The patriarchal caste Hindu nationalist discourse started gaining strength from the later decades of the nineteenth century. It began to uphold the figure of the “new Indian woman” who would be an amalgamation of modernity and tradition. The figure of the warrior-mother as the Virangana was held up as the model in the making of the Indian nation. However, though reference to other women-warriors occurs in the history of the Revolt, they do not figure in the dominant nationalist narrative.

An example of such exclusion are the courtesans who fought actively in the Revolt. Not only is there meagre historical documentation, very few courtesans-turned-warriors find representation in fiction. Only Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh and Azizun Nisa Bai of Kanpur have fictional narratives based on their lives. Like their contemporary Rani Lakshmibai, these courtesans also fought in the same Revolt. However, perhaps owing to their social identity as “public” and sexually independent (Muslim) woman, the courtesan does not find a position in the caste Hindu nationalist discourse.

### Courtesans in India

Courtesans have a long provenance in Indian culture and despite regional differences in nomenclature, a courtesan commonly signifies a woman who exercised sexual, artistic,

financial and political liberty, rendering her unconventional for society. Courtesans were, thus, “public” women, though not necessarily available for all (Singh, “Making Visible,” 100; Oldenburg). They, in fact, occupied a “respectable” social position in nineteenth-century Awadh.

During the years leading to the Revolt of 1857, the courtesan’s *kotha* became a space for political conspiracies. Historical evidence suggests that courtesans played a “covert” role in the Revolt, lending their establishments as hubs for the revolutionaries, and often financing the conspiracies plotted within them. Sanctions imposed on courtesans reveal that British officials were aware of their secret participation in the Revolt (Oldenburg 259, Singh “Courtesans and the Revolt,” 1678). As a result, the elite and “cultured” courtesans were cut off from their arts and reduced to doing sex work after the Revolt. With the decline of the rule of the Nawabs in Awadh, the unsuccessful Revolt of 1857 and the restrictions imposed by the victorious British, courtesan culture went into a terminal decline.

However, the courtesans’ access to the political happenings during the anti-colonial nationalist struggle in general, and the Revolt, in particular, is to be noted. It may be questioned if they had any political agency; however, stray references to their activity reveal not only covert involvement but also their active role as combat soldiers. Why then is their role in the Revolt not more visible?

Courtesans who survived the colonial government had to endure the bourgeois Hindu nationalist structure (Meena Tula; Teresa Hubel). The Anti-Nautch Act passed in 1947 banned temple dancing and dedication of devadasis. Thereafter, performing women came to be viewed as prostitutes (Srinivasan 1869, 1873; Singh, “Retrieving Voices,” 95; Hubel 218) and the courtesan was excised from the hegemonic discourse. Moreover, popular representations of the historical courtesan became increasingly skewed, thus reducing an otherwise strong, independent, flesh-and-blood woman to a negative archetype.

After India’s independence, Hazrat Mahal, like other Muslim courtesans was also excluded from nationalist and historical narratives by the dominant upper-caste Hindu nationalists. Unlike Rani Lakshmibai, Hazrat Mahal finds meagre representation in popular historical and fictional narratives; her identity as a courtesan is the antithesis to patriarchal notions of the virtuous woman.

### Begum Hazrat Mahal: A Brief Historical Account

British historical narratives on the Revolt in Awadh discuss Nawab Wajid Ali Shah with marginal reference to Hazrat Mahal. Ira Mukhoty discusses Mahal to a little extent in her recent book *Heroines: Powerful Indian Women of Myths & History*. However, despite the promising title, Mukhoty offers a more detailed description of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and his patronage of the courtesan culture in nineteenth-century Lucknow. Mukhoty states:

Muhammadi Khanum [as Hazrat Mahal was originally known] was born to a slave of African origin called Umber, who was owned by a certain Ghulam Ali Khan. Her mother was Maher Afza, Umber’s mistress. At some stage of her adolescence she was sold by her parents to a courtesan. (152)

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah had an “institution of the *pari*, or fairy”. He “acquired a large harem of singers and dancers by using a Shi’a variant of Islamic marriage called *mu’tah* (sic) wherein a temporary contract could be drawn up between a man and a woman for a specific amount of time in exchange for gifts or money.” These women included “female palanquin bearers, courtesans, domestic servants, and women who came in and out of the palace.” He married four “women of high birth and important political connections through traditional *nikah*” especially during his father’s lifetime. If any woman from his later *mut’ah* wives, who belonged to the lower strata of society, gave birth to the king’s children, they “were given the title ‘mahals’ and were allowed to live in purdah” (Mukhoty 156–57).

When Muhammadi Khanum was bought as a courtesan for the Nawab's courts, she was renamed Mahak Pari. Due to her intelligence and poetic talents, the Nawab's interest in her increased. In an autobiography titled, *Pari Khana*, Wajid Ali Shah notes that he married Mahak Pari according to the *mut'ah* marriage laws, and in due course of time she gave birth to Birjis Qadr. The Nawab notes the birth of his son with great joy (96).

Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, in her book *The Last King in Awadh, 1822-1887*, states, "If [the *mut'ah* wife] became pregnant during the marriage, the child was considered to have been fathered by the husband and was therefore legitimate" (143). Such *mut'ah* wives were "given the title 'mahals' and were allowed to live in purdah" (Mukhoty 157). Similarly, Mahak Pari was also permitted to live in purdah and Birjis Qadr was considered a legitimate offspring of the Nawab. In 1850, the Nawab divorced six of his wives, including Begum Hazrat Mahal. It is believed that Janab-i Alliyah, the Nawab's mother had ordered this move (Llewellyn-Jones 13, 144).

Hazrat Mahal, better known as Iftikhar-un-nissa at the time of her divorce, "retired quietly to a house in Lucknow along with Birjis Qadr, living on the pension provided to her by her ex-husband." After Lord Dalhousie's proclamation to annex Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah retired to Calcutta with three of his wives, leaving the others in Lucknow. Though British history sees the Nawab as a debauch, Indian historical records suggest that the exiled Wajid Ali Shah "was deeply mourned by his people" (Mukhoty 158-59).

The fire of the impending Revolt was kindling under the surface, and Awadh was in want of a new king. Wajid Ali Shah's eldest son, Noshewan Qadr, was deaf and dumb and hence, not considered fit for the crown. Eventually, Hazrat Mahal's twelve-year-old son Birjis Qadr was crowned the King of Awadh in July 1857 in Kaiserbagh Palace, as a result of which she became the queen regent (Llewellyn-Jones 14, 25, 159).

Historical accounts such as these scarcely describe the Begum's journey from obscurity and squalor to becoming the queen regent of Lucknow (Mukhoty 152). Moreover, after recapturing Awadh, "all the papers and documents found" except Wajid Ali Shah's autobiography, were destroyed by colonial troops. As Mukhoty suggests, "all that remains are the accounts of witnesses recorded during the trials that followed the recapture of Lucknow and the proclamations issued by Hazrat Mahal" (172). Thus, there are barely any historical narratives dedicated to Hazrat Mahal. Kenize Mourad's novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013) is perhaps the only fictional narrative on the Begum. As for cinematic representations, filmmaker Mohi-ud- Din Mirza's "Begum Hazrat Mahal: The Last Queen of Awadh" (2011) is the only documentary depicting the queen's life.

### **Kenize Mourad's *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013)**

Published in 2013, Kenize Mourad's novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* depicts a fictionalized account of the nineteenth-century historical courtesan and queen of Lucknow, Begum Hazrat Mahal. The novel traces the humble origins of Begum Hazrat Mahal in an ordinary household and her upward movement to the courtesan's salon, and finally to the court of the nineteenth-century Nawab of Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah. The novel also depicts the Begum's involvement in the Revolt of 1857, her romantic and sexual relationships, her role as the queen regent of Lucknow and her escape to Nepal, from where she continued her anti-colonial nationalist fight.

(I) Mourad's novel does not devote much space to Hazrat Mahal's childhood and life as a courtesan, in order perhaps to emphasize the Begum's role in the Revolt. Begum Hazrat Mahal, as the novel narrates, is born as Muhammadi "into a family of small artisans from Faizabad, the ancient capital of the kingdom of Awadh." She is twelve years old when her mother dies, leaving her with her father, Mian Amber. After the death of her father, who is "the only person who loved and protected her," the young girl is orphaned. She is taken



in by her uncle who has a garment shop. In a turn of events, Muhammadi is discovered by a eunuch, who sends two courtesans to take the girl away to their salon (26–9). Thus, Muhammadi is sold and “pushed” into the *kotha* by women: her aunt and the two courtesans, suggesting the use of force in recruiting girls as courtesans, and the limited agency of the women who ran such businesses in the patriarchal world.

Aligned with historical records, Mourad’s novel portrays how Muhammadi is renamed Hazrat Mahal in the Nawab’s palace. She gains recognition not only for her exquisite beauty but also for her skills in poetry and satire. However, Mourad pictures Hazrat Mahal in a unique light. Hazrat Mahal is described as an atypical courtesan, who “prefers to spend her time alone, reading or composing poems, rather than participating in games and chatter she considers childish” (Mourad 34, 79). Mourad’s intention is to represent Hazrat Mahal as an unconventional woman of her times, and therefore she presents other courtesans as unintelligent and untrained in the arts. Oldenburg’s research suggests that courtesans in nineteenth-century Lucknow were educated and skilled in all forms of art like poetry, languages, music and dance. Mourad’s portrayal of Hazrat Mahal tends to see all other courtesans in derogatory terms, thus presenting a patriarchal view of the institution.

Mourad presents the Nawab as somewhat less manly for harboring “feminine” interests in poetry, music and dance rather than “masculine” warfare and politics. As the patriarchal head of the court and the kingdom, he indulges in revelry and sexual pleasure involving the commodification of women. The novel depicts the Nawab’s male chauvinism and lack of concern towards the women he once “enjoyed.” Hazrat Mahal notes this lapse, although other courtesans only consider the absent husband and king to be their sole guardian (Mourad 94). Thus, the novel depicts Hazrat Mahal as a self-aware woman who recognizes and resists the patriarchal order in which she is positioned.

(II) Mourad’s novel portrays the *zenana* as an alternate space for the Begums. The Begums, though secluded, are politically aware and receive information of the political goings-on in the public sphere. They exult in the idea that the British Raj be uprooted by the impending Revolt. They “spend the whole afternoon in discussion, drawing up the most absurd [political] plans” (Mourad 151, 170–71). The novel suggests a life full of intrigue within purdah. The *zenana* restricts women from the public sphere; however it does not preclude their political interest in matters of the state. Despite their political awareness, however, the novel tends to dismiss the other Begums’ participation in political discussion as “absurd.” Thus, the ideological position of Mourad’s novel is entangled in a web of contradictions. Other women characters exhibiting political understanding and individual voice are depicted as unimportant for their lack of appropriate knowledge of the matters of the state. Mourad seems to be exceptionally partial to her protagonist.

The novelist presents Hazrat Mahal as involved and knowledgeable in political matters. She uses her “burqa” as a tool that facilitates her mobility within the inner and outer world; the burqa helps her venture into the public world to gauge political events and mood (Mourad 153). However, Mourad’s novel also shows how Hazrat Mahal “[heaves] a sigh of relief” when she returns from such visits to the markets and takes off her burqa. It perhaps implies that she does not usually like being veiled but only employs it as a tool to access mobility in the outer world. While Mourad clearly understands that the purdah is a patriarchal invention to police female sexuality, her protagonist Hazrat Mahal cleverly appropriates this patriarchal instrument in order to hone her own political sensibility. A reader may well question Mourad’s representation. It can be argued that Hazrat Mahal’s choice to be in purdah in the outside world may also indicate her indoctrination in the patriarchal society of which she is an inalienable part. Hazrat Mahal’s choice to be in purdah reminds readers of the contemporary debate on the issue.

Through Hazrat Mahal’s character, Mourad’s novel sketches a figure similar to Rani Lakshmbai. Unlike the latter however, Hazrat Mahal’s choice to participate in the Revolt



is not forced upon her. Mourad's novel portrays an unrelenting warrior woman fighting against the British, but it suggests that it is her male lover and guardian, Raja Jai Laal, who is the source of inspiration (403). Thus, Mourad presents a rather problematic view that a male consort, and his patriarchal espousal give birth to a woman warrior.

In the novel very few people appreciate Hazrat Mahal's political sensibility. However, Mourad shows that her privileged position as the queen mother offers her the opportunity to articulate her political opinions. She vehemently oppose religious chauvinism and patriarchal impositions (Mourad 157, 205, 309). There are not too many Indian historical records that point to the activity of Mughal women outside the *zenana*. European historical records comprising the accounts of British officials and the few white women who were permitted to visit the *zenana*, reveal the administrative, political and business affairs of the Mughal begums. These records suggest that begums, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were powerful, wealthy and capable women in commerce and trade.

Aparna Kapadia discusses the capabilities of begums and queen mothers who were powerful businesswomen and able politicians. However, such powerful women were also constrained within patriarchal boundaries. Confined to the *zenana*, on rare occasions when interaction with the outer world was necessary, they would be in *purdah*. Thus, their involvement in administration, politics, trade or commerce was restricted. They relied on male servants, agents and middlemen, which hindered their progress. However, contrary to popular representation, the begums of the Mughal period were accomplished businesswomen and political enablers ("We Know All About Warrior Queens...").

There is a degree of ambivalence in the portrayal of Hazrat Mahal in the novel. A loyal wife who tries to justify her husband's detachment from the ongoing political upheaval Lucknow, Hazrat Mahal is yet resentful that the sovereign is a British captive, least interested in his kingdom and the well-being of his people (Mourad 168). Her powerful political voice is on display during her son's coronation ceremony. Raja Jai Laal addresses the audience on behalf of the minor and the queen regent, as convention dictates that women do not speak in public. However, Hazrat Mahal steps forward and addresses her people, promising to serve them and exhorting them to offer their commitment in the name of their Nawab. Jai Laal, who is initially "surprised by this unceremonious intervention," is later "stunned" (207-08). However, the male *taluqdars* present are outraged (Mourad 208). Thus, a woman's active role in politics is frowned upon and probably considered threatening to the hegemonic social structure since it poses a threat to the patriarchal structure of society. Secondly, as a courtesan with a hypersexual identity, her competence in administrative matters is also easier to dismiss.

However, the response of the Lucknawi women to Begum Hazrat Mahal's new political position is quite striking. Perhaps intending to draw attention to the possibility of female solidarity, the novelist has these lines: "hidden behind the *jalis*, the women [who nevertheless] praise the young boy's qualities [but they also] ...marvel that for the first time in Lucknow, power is in the hands of a woman" (Mourad 210).

The novelist paints an elaborate image of Hazrat Mahal's first day as the queen regent at the court, providing a graphic description of how she adorns herself, and the confidence with which she projects her heroic leadership. Is this overt expression of sexuality aimed to exact obedience and awe from the male-dominant court? Can Hazrat Mahal be seen as a Virangana? We must note that she has political, administrative as well as sexual independence.

Hazrat Mahal quickly proves herself as an efficient administrator and "a remarkable organiser" (Mourad 218). She focuses on the financial matters of the state in times of conflict. She negotiates with bankers, and to meet the shortage of funds, she "decides to have her jewellery and all her gold and silver ornaments melted down", convincing the other reluctant begums to follow suit. As a result of her proficient budgeting abilities, she

can “secretly set aside a small war chest to finance her diplomatic actions” (Mourad 318). The novel presents a Virangana who is more accomplished in administrative and financial affairs than in actual warfare and combat fighting; her achievements thus redefine the conventional trope of the warrior woman.

However, she senses the omnipresent scrutiny to which she is subject. The patriarchal society enveloping her expects a courtesan who has “come from nowhere” to fail, so that she may be brought back under the clutches of the normative social structure (Mourad 220–21). The Begum’s limited freedom to express her voice and sexuality is probably only permitted to her as a lower class and a “fallen woman.” Positioned as she is in royal surroundings, her ancestry entirely crosses out her individual competence.

Through a solitary incident on the battlefield, the novel portrays Hazrat Mahal in combat during the Revolt in Lucknow. Raja Jai Laal reprimands her for joining the armed forces. The queen mother’s political status symbolizes stability and security in the kingdom. She is a mother not only to the king but to the entire kingdom. The position of the queen mother restricts her individuality. Jai Laal’s rebuke infuriates her for its patronizing attitude. She asserts that her presence on the battlefield as the queen mother will encourage the sepoys, who “captivated by this fragile woman’s bravery, fight with increased courage and daring” (Mourad 286). Thus, Hazrat Mahal’s presence on the battlefield is limited to her inspiring presence as the Mother Nation exhorting the sons to martyr themselves for her.

Mourad’s novel portrays Hazrat Mahal as a rational and pragmatic woman. She does not underestimate their weakened situation when the British lay siege to the palace. The British troops enter the Chattr Manzil Palace, ordering the women to evacuate and move to the south wing of Kaisarbagh. Unlike a few other women who refuse to leave, Hazrat Mahal recognizes that bravado and de-contextualized loyalty will not save the situation. Nor is she given to believing in prophecies and miracles (Mourad 96, 107). Thus, Hazrat Mahal, who later becomes an integral part of the 1857 Revolt, is depicted neither as an impractical chauvinist nor as a religious fanatic.

However, the novel does highlight her patriotism in crucial instances. After Wajid Ali Shah surrenders on Awadh’s annexation, Hazrat Mahal readily accepts the position of the regent and shoulders the responsibility of regaining Awadh from the clutches of the colonizers (Mourad 201–203). This independent choice of the Begum’s is, however, not historically documented. Mourad chooses to establish the Begum as a strong and independent patriot. The novel also shows the queen regent playing an active role in the unfolding of the Revolt by being in continuous contact with the rebels.

During one such meeting, she is advised by the sepoys to wait for the Revolt to gain strength. It is noteworthy that the active agents of the Revolt are men who seem to patronize her. Nevertheless, she refuses to be a passive nationalist waiting for men to initiate action. She claims,

We, women spend our whole lives waiting, until...we have nothing left to wait for. But this time it is different, do you not see that? (Mourad 118)

Hazrat Mahal does not acquiesce in the advice to be the quintessential passive woman. When the “good woman” usually waits or is expected to wait (to act), she is rendered passive and inferior in the patriarchal power structure. Hazrat Mahal is asked to wait till the male leaders of the impending Revolt take action. However, she flouts the normative and decides that she will not wait; she plans to take matters into her own hands and fight the British. Thus, Mourad, in certain aspects, manages to sketch a strong female figure in the novel.

Apart from the single incident of Hazrat Mahal portrayed on the battlefield, the novel also mentions other women playing minor roles in the battle: they “hurl[ed] volleys of bricks and stones from the terraces [on the British troops]” (Mourad 288). Thus, women’s

active participation on the battlefield is acknowledged and highlighted in the novel. The novel mentions the historical statement published by the "London Times": "The Begum of Awadh shows greater strategic sense and courage than all her generals put together" (416), which is a testimony of the British acknowledgement and appreciation of Hazrat Mahal's diplomatic leadership.

(III) Hazrat Mahal, as described in the novel, is not only an able political leader but she is also a compassionate ruler. She expresses her loyalty towards the people of Lucknow before the onset of the Revolt (Mourad 122). She expresses her outrage at the tragic Bibighar incident in Kanpur when several innocent British women and children were massacred by Indian sepoys. The novel also shows her as a progressive woman who is tolerant towards all religions (Mourad 243–45, 254, 272). However, her kindness and humanity seem to result from her maternal aspect; she has "motherly" feelings for her son and her people. This aspect of her personality also surfaces in moments when she is expected to be a ruthless authoritarian; Mourad shows that such duties disturb her emotionally.

On one occasion, circumstances lead to the pronouncement of capital punishment. Unlike customary practice, which does not allow women to witness criminals hanged to death, Hazrat Mahal looks at the accused "with her penetrating gaze" and orders the punishment to be carried out. She wishes to set an example of the consequences of betraying the kingdom, and her authoritarian diktat shows that the "crowd's cheers drown the victim's cries" when they witness "justice [having] served" (Mourad 258).

The novel attempts to establish her as "a true sovereign" (Mourad 258) but, it also portrays the impact of the incident on the Begum's state of mind. She repents her decision, considering herself to be cold-blooded, and wonders if she has turned into an inhuman ruler (Mourad 259). Does her self-incrimination weaken the authoritarian figure who is feared by all, which the novel probably intends to portray? The question arises, can a woman holding significant political power not be shrewd and stern? A female political leader who is compelled to take political decisions based on the state's interests, perhaps emerges as "unwomanly" and may be considered a "dangerous woman" in society. Hence, Hazrat Mahal's repentance is necessary for her to fit in the conventional trope of the Virangana as a brave warrior but a doting mother.

(IV) Hazrat Mahal does not succumb to the British Raj nor does she yield to its ally, Jung Bahadur the king of Nepal. Mourad portrays her as the lone survivor of the Revolt. Pragmatic as always, Hazrat Mahal manages to escape to Nepal from the clutches of the Company. In exile with her son and friend Mumtaz, she secretly tries to sustain the spirit of nationalism amongst her people. There are several occasions when Jung Bahadur forces her to reveal her secret activity (Mourad 424). She only responds in silence, thus resisting colonial power. Mourad's novel portrays Hazrat Mahal's resilience against the British Raj, which may not necessarily translate to heroism on the battlefield. However, this steely resolve does establish her as an alternative Virangana.

(V) Hazrat Mahal's bold expression of her sexuality does not conform to the image of an ideal aristocratic Nawab's wife. The novel probably justifies her sexuality that ties in with her origins as a courtesan. During her first private meeting with Jai Laal, she shows "none of the shyness and simpering airs common to the palace women" (Mourad 173). Hazrat Mahal is aware of her beauty and its effect on the men around her. She uses her body and sexuality as a tool to appropriate her political standpoint. For a woman who is usually in purdah in public, she "allow[s] her veil to slip, revealing an aquiline nose and a determined chin that contrasts with her voluptuous lips," which the Raja notices (Mourad 175). Hazrat Mahal seductively enlists the male gaze to strengthen her administrative position. Once his attention is gained, however, she resists his patronizing attitude (Mourad 175).

The novel also depicts how Hazrat Mahal develops romantic feelings towards the Raja (233). She realizes her feelings for Wajid Ali Shah are initially "an admiration for a sovereign

wreathed in glory”; later, they develop to “tenderness tinged with pity for a kind and loyal being” (Mourad 330). Her feelings for Jai Laal, however, are more amorous. Their liaison is consummated in a *kotha* in the city, an alternate space that permits Hazrat Mahal to flout the normative structure. The novel describes their erotic encounter in the *kotha*, dwelling on her sensual response. In Jai Laal’s embrace, “for the first time in her life, she is no longer in control of her feelings” (Mourad 331). It is debatable whether the novel tries to portray a sexually expressive woman or wishes to show her loss of individuality under male guardianship. Hazrat Mahal’s affair with Jai Laal is fictitious. Did the novelist feel the necessity of showing a romantic side to her otherwise strong and independent protagonist? It can be argued that the affair may be a way of depicting the Begum’s sexuality. However, the fact that this amorous incident takes place in an alternate space, that does not interfere with her position as the regent appears to undercut authorial intent to add to the Begum’s unconventionality. Moreover, the Begum’s readiness to shoulder her responsibilities towards her son and the kingdom confine her within the patriarchal structure. Hazrat Mahal is held back from pursuing a conjugal life with Jai Laal. Secondly, her relationship with Jai Laal makes her more dependent on him, validating a woman’s need for a man’s patronage and security. Thus, Mourad’s portrayal of a fictitious amorous relationship between Hazrat Mahal and Jai Laal does not contribute greatly to her depiction as a powerful feminist figure.

Mukhoty notes that Hazrat Mahal was divorced by the Nawab in 1850 “probably at the indignation of the queen mother who abhorred the low-born among the king’s wives.” Consequently, she “retired quietly to a house in Lucknow along with Birjis Qadr [before the prince was crowned as the Nawab after Awadh’s annexation], living on the pension provided by her husband” (158). Mourad’s novel, however, does not mention Hazrat Mahal’s divorce. A divorced Muslim courtesan rising to the political position of the queen regent makes her a strong, progressive woman in a patriarchal colonial society. The novel’s omission of this significant detail is telling of Mourad’s preference to paint Hazrat Mahal more conventionally in the context of the Revolt.

(VII) Mourad’s novel portrays how a woman who does not engage in conventional gender roles is considered to have failed in being a “good wife” and a “good mother.” The novel, however, does not question these assumptions; it simply represents them. The novel shows Hazrat Mahal’s friend, Mumtaz, to be emotionally closer to Birjis Qadar than his mother. Mumtaz observes that “the queen mother is far too busy” in political and administrative affairs. Mumtaz also questions Hazrat Mahal’s lack of maternal feelings (Mourad 405). Although the novel does not draw any definite conclusions concerning Hazrat Mahal’s incapacity to be a “good woman of patriarchy,” it perhaps subtly endorses the perceptions to which a woman flouting the hegemonic structure is subject.

## Conclusion

The biographical fiction explored in this paper throws light on the life of a historical courtesan who took part in the Revolt of 1857 and was erased from the hegemonic discourse. An analysis of Mourad’s representation of Hazrat Mahal, who is otherwise marginalized in dominant history, suggests how available historical records can transform into fictionalized narratives. The novel attempts to relocate courtesans in the political and historical trajectory of the nation. Apart from their military role in the Revolt, their negotiation with routine centres of power is also incredibly significant in understanding the lives of courtesans. The agency which the conventional “fallen women” exercised in their lifestyle, their profession, politics and their passion is explored in the paper. The ideal trope of the warrior-mother Virangana may thus be debunked. This paper has attempted an examination of a courtesan who may not have necessarily engaged in actual

warfare. It takes note of her resistance in other significant domains and suggests she can be considered as a Virangana from a postcolonial and feminist perspective.

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# In Other Words: Collaboration and Its (Dis)Contents in Elena Poniatowska's *Here's to You, Jesusa*

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MUKUL CHATURVEDI

**Abstract:** Collaborative life writing presents a complex tale of interpersonal encounter and negotiation. Focussing on the multiple ethical challenges that inform collaboration, this essay examines Elena Poniatowska's testimonial novel *Here's to You Jesusa!* that makes explicit the issue of power, privilege and location in collaborative life writing and prefigures discussion on positionality and identity that have become central to feminist ethnography. While discussing the contributions and limitations of collaboration, this paper addresses the following questions: What is the ethical responsibility involved when we witness the lives of "vulnerable subjects"? How is the writer implicated in the suffering of the subject whom she seeks to represent? How does the actual encounter and dialogue function on the ground? More fundamentally, does the interactive space of witnessing enable mutual recognition of identity and an assertion of agency constituted relationally through dialogue?

**Keywords:** Ethics, collaboration, agency, identity, Elena Poniatowska

## Introduction

Celebrated Mexican journalist and writer, Elena Poniatowska elaborates on the challenges that accompany the process of collaboration that involves the representation of 'vulnerable subjects'. (Couser 2004)<sup>1</sup> For a writer who is committed to giving voice to the marginalized, the concern is more ethical than methodological when it comes to the representation of disenfranchised and dispossessed, and she acknowledges the asymmetrical relationship of power that informs the production of testimonial novels and ethnographic representation.

An ethical problem arises around the writing of testimonial novels. Are those who create them writers or not? Are they simply opportunists who...plunge into the manufacture of easily consumed works that will fill the void between the elite and the illiterate in the Latin American cultures? They confiscate a reality, present it as their own, steal their informant's words, plagiarize their colloquium's, tape their language and take possession of their souls. (60–61 cited in Jorgenson, 1994)

Poniatowska's concerns in the above quotation raise important questions about the form and function of the Latin American *testimonio*, one of the most well-known life writing forms recognized for giving voice to the oppressed and the marginalized people. Written in the context of war, violence and human rights violations, the hybrid genre of *testimonio* is firmly rooted in political and historical context and is aimed at raising awareness, soliciting support, solidarity, and denouncing violence. The *testimonio* narrative is a product of collaboration between an author/editor and her 'subject', or 'informant' who communicates the story to the writer, who then records the oral narrative, transcribes, edits and then textualizes it. Collaboration is central to *testimonio* and texts often include factual evidence in terms of maps, data, and other information to strengthen their claim to authenticity. While the term testimonial novel and *testimonio* are used interchangeably, its useful to draw the distinction, since *Here's to You Jesusa*, moves away from the documentary format



of classic *testimonio* as defined by testimonio scholars like (Beverley 2004)<sup>2</sup> and presents the life story of Jesusa in fictionalized form. The testimonial novel departs from the conventional testimonio by drawing attention to its fictionality. The author is thus more of an 'intermediate' figure in the testimonial novel who controls the final production of the text but at the same time has to disguise the involvement in the text's creation. Unlike the traditional *testimonio*, which is documentary in nature, the testimonial novel because of its self-avowed claims to fictionality blurs the boundary between fact and fiction, history and literature, despite locating the text in a social and political context. Lucille Kerr argues that the testimonial novel is a "type of disguise" (382), but the authors of testimonial novels must provide some factual details to prove the 'truth' of the story that they are narrating. In a curious interplay of fact and fiction, Poniatowska's testimonial novel provides sufficient evidence that Jesusa is a 'real' woman and locates the text in a historical context, but the novelistic mode of narration complicates the 'truth' of the story. While *testimonio* is hailed for its coalitional politics, collaboration, and giving voice to the struggles of the marginalized, the anxieties outlined by Poniatowska in her introduction to the novel mirror ethical concerns of negotiating the difference between the 'subject' and the editor/writer and honouring Jesusa's life which also serves as a source of Mexican history. In fictionalizing Jesusa's life her concern is whether she would be able to do justice to Jesusa's character and give her the dignity denied to her in her life.

Published in 1969, as *Hasta no verte Jesus mio*, (*Till We Meet Again, Dear Jesus*) and in the English translation as *Here's to you Jesusa* (2000) Elena Poniatowska's '*novela testimonial*,' is based on the extensive interviews carried out between 1963 and 1964, with Josefina Bórquez, an old Mexican working-class woman. The narrative is in the form of a flashback, with Jesusa telling her story, spanning nearly seven decades of the twentieth century. Poniatowska met Jesusa every Wednesday afternoon from four to six in her tenement in one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Mexico City. Set in the Mexico of the 1960s, the narrative recreates the history of post-revolutionary Mexico from the perspective of a working-class, poor Indian woman. Jesusa's performative storytelling takes us back into another world, different from the contemporary shantytown of Mexico City, where the story is being narrated. An Indian by birth, Jesusa was born in Oaxaca and suffered severe hardships all through her life. Having lost her mother when she was five, she faced childhood abuse and had to put up with her father's various lovers. Brutalized by grinding poverty, neglect and humiliation she suffers from her childhood, Jesusa grows up to be a violent street fighter who firmly believes in standing up for one's rights. Jesusa's fictionalized life story records a momentous period of Mexican history, and her memories offer a counternarrative to the official accounts of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and its aftermath. At the age of fifteen, Jesusa is forced to marry an abusive army officer who is part of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and she becomes one of the *soldaderas*<sup>3</sup> (female soldier) who took also took part in the revolution. At the Revolution's end, finds herself in Mexico City, where she ends up doing a series of menial jobs; maid, barber, hog butcher, nanny, box maker, and whore house manager. Though ruined by poverty, loneliness and loveless life, she emerges as a brilliant performer of her story and a resilient survivor.

### Ethical Dilemmas

The sentimental introduction to the novel reproduces the dialogic exchanges between Poniatowska and Jesusa and establishes the tension between the two voices. Poniatowska's confessional style points to the limitations of telling Jesusa's story because of the differences that separate the two women. Weathered by age and misfortune, Jesusa's grind of daily living does not give enough time so that she can sit back and reflect upon her life. "What business do you have with me?" she asks Poniatowska. On being told that she wished to

talk, Jesusa snaps back: “To me? Listen, I work. If I don’t work, I do not eat. I don’t have time to hang around chatting.” (viii) Jesusa’s apparent distrust of Poniatowska and the purpose of meeting stems from the obvious difference that mark the two women. Acutely aware of the difference of race and class, Poniatowska feels that the gap between them can be bridged by empathy and understanding; but Jesusa stubbornly maintains a degree of distance despite sharing her life. She defies the stereotype of passive women of her class and makes the editor realize that she will benefit more from this encounter of storytelling. “She threw my absence in my face: You look out for your interests! You will come and see me as long as you can get what you want out of me, and then there will be neither hide nor hair of you. That’s how it always is; everyone uses whomever they can.” (xviii) Awed and confused by Jesusa’s responses, the introduction highlights Poniatowska’s anxiety and limitations as she struggles to give voice to Jesusa. Jesusa admonishes Poniatowska and chides her for her inexperience in the ways of the world. Commenting on Poniatowska’s inability to handle the odd jobs like feeding the chickens, Jesusa remarks, “it’s obvious that you are high class and useless.” (x) Plagued by the difference that separates them, Poniatowska strives to balance the extreme poverty of Jesusa with the splendour of her own living. “My socialism was in name only. As I got into the tub of hot water, I’d remember the washbasin under the bed where Jesusa rinsed her overalls and bathed herself on Saturdays. I was ashamed: “I hope she never sees my house or how I live”. Poniatowska guilt and shame over her own privileged life compared to the poverty of Jesusa makes her feel inadequate. “Watching her act out her story, able to make her own decisions, made my lack of character more obvious to me.” (xiii). The challenge for Poniatowska is whether she would be able to honour the life and voice of Jesusa given her ‘lack of character’, compared to the strength and tenacity of Jesusa. To overcome the feeling of guilt and transcend the barrier poses both methodological and ethical challenges.

The introduction full of light-hearted banter and barbs in *Here’s to You Jesusa* gives way to a seamless narrative told in the first person by Jesusa. The text is an extended monologue where Jesusa performs her story spanning nearly seven decades of Mexican history. The tension between the two voices disappears and the narrative captures Jesusa in all its complexity and presents an endearing portrait. Poniatowska seamless narrative simulates features of oral narration to give a sense of immediacy and authenticity to Jesusa’s story. The narrative complicates the truth-telling project by confounding the binaries between fact and fiction and draws attention to its fictionality throughout the text. It is as if only by fictionalizing her life that Jesusa could live through it. Jesusa does not authorize the use of her photograph or the use of her real name in the novel. While the introduction locates the origin of the novel in biographical facts, in the novel, Jesusa’s performative storytelling takes us back into another world, different from the contemporary shantytown of Mexico City, where the story is being narrated.

On Wednesday afternoons, as the sunset and the blue sky changed to orange, in that semi-dark little room, in the midst of the shrieking of the children, the slamming doors, the shouting, and the radio going full blast, another life emerged – that of Jesusa Palancares, the one she relived as she retold it. Through a tiny crack, we watched the sky, its colours, blue, then orange, and finally black. I squinted so my gaze would fit through that crack, and we would enter the other life. (xii)

By taking the reader back in time, so that “we would enter another life”, Jesusa becomes the protagonist of her own story and hints at the distance between her ‘real’ self and the ‘narrative’ self. “I never told you I was sad. I told you that the life I’ve led has been sad, but not me.” (80) Poniatowska seamless narrative lets Jesusa tell her story in the first person effortlessly by creating a rhetorical effect of orality. The text simulates spoken discourse by incorporating features of oral narration like repetition, flashback, rhetorical questions,

digressions and moralistic conclusions that create a sense of veracity. While Jesusa's forceful presence dominates the narrative, the text presents a polyphony of voices "of other marginalized women" who "sang a chorus to Jesusa Palancares's melody." (xix)

### Narrative Voice and Authority

One of the significant concerns of collaboration is the fictive nature of narrative voice since it is subject to several levels of mediation. The life history model that influenced the early writers of testimonio did not consider the tenuous relationship between the native 'informant' and the researcher/editor. The life history was an authentic reproduction of the informant's voice with the researcher acting more as a facilitator than as a joint producer of the text. Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave*<sup>4</sup> is one of the earliest examples of the Latin American testimonial novel, where Barnet strives to simulate the spoken discourse of the slave Esteban Montejo. For Barnet, the sound of orality is indicative of the 'pure' voice of the informant, creates verisimilitude and is intended to mask the manipulation and textualization of the narrative. Barnet's belief in the 'authentic' native voice is apparent when he says "the voice of the dispossessed ...is purer and more spontaneous, because it is fresh, unrehearsed, unbound by the mantle of rhetoric." According to Barnet, retaining and reproducing the effect of orality in the testimonial not only creates a seemingly authentic linguistic reality but also bestows narrative authority to the speaker. The term "gestor" that Barnet uses implies neither author nor editor in the conventional sense. In allowing the oral narrative of the testimonial subject to gestate within herself the 'gestor', plays the role of a facilitator, who recreates the narrative in the process of textualization. However, understanding the intonations of the spoken language is also the key to a "real understanding of identity." Poniatowska's emphasis on orality is not to retrieve the original and authentic speech of Jesusa or to assert the truth of storytelling. Her concerns regarding stealing 'informants' words' and 'confiscating reality' as mentioned in the quotation at the beginning of the paper have been discussed by many life writing scholars. According to Thomas G. Couser (2004) collaborative life writing combines features of both biography and autobiography as in this case, the 'subject' and the editor/author are present simultaneously in one text. The result of this collaboration is a 'composite', voice a combination of the author and the subject. Ventriloquism, a term used for making others talk, is employed by Couser in the context of collaborative writing. For Couser "collaborative autobiography is inherently ventriloquistic...the danger tends to be that of attributing to the subject a voice and a narrative not originating with him or her" (1998, 344). Anthropologist Clifford Geertz also employs a similar terminology regarding several authorial strategies he identified in ethnographic writing. "There are a number of these pretensions," Geertz notes, "but they all tend to come down in one way or another to an attempt to get around the un-get roundable fact that all ethnographical descriptions are homemade, that they are the describer's descriptions, not those of the described" (1988, 144-145). The charge of ventriloquism is also echoed by theorist Paul John Eakin who says, "there is no getting around the fact that ventriloquism, making others talk, is by definition a central rhetorical phenomenon of these narratives." (1999, 181)

Theoretical interventions ethnography and have addressed concerns raised by Poniatowska as the issues of responsibility and commitment are inbuilt in the process of collaboration. Analysing the relationship of the editor/narrator with her 'subject' in the creation of feminist ethnographic autobiography, Anne E Goldman disagrees with critics like Couser who have used the metaphor of ventriloquism in the context of collaborative life writing. According to her, "collaboration does not mean capitulation" (184). She notes, "recognizing that an oral history is produced out of a context of political inequality does not mean that we should dismiss it, a priori, as a form of ventriloquism for the voice

of authority” (201). The self-reflexive turn in feminist ethnography has led to an emphasis on the position of the researcher, her location, identity and an understanding that ethnographic knowledge is a partial representation. For Judith Stacey and Daphne Patai doing ethical research poses a challenge as there are systemic inequalities between the first world researcher and non –elite third world subject. Stacey highlights the contradictions inherent in positioning oneself as researcher and friend, observer and participant, ethnographer and feminist, authority and collaborator in other women’s lives. The anxiety experienced in playing these contradictory roles is articulated by Poniatowska in the introduction as Jesusa does let her have any claim to sisterhood and keeps her distance from her collaborator. By not allowing the use of her name or photograph, limiting access to herself by allowing visits only once a week, not allowing the conversations to be tape-recorded, Jesusa attempts to negotiate the terms of representation despite her vulnerable position. Poniatowska’s concerns elaborated in the introduction echo also Judith Stacey’s argument that although “the ethnographic method appears ideally suited to feminist research as it draws on those concerns of empathy, connection and concern that many feminists consider being women’s special strength”, it is unclear “whether the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous forms of exploitation.” (22:1988) Poniatowska grapples with similar dilemmas as outlined by Stacey and struggles with the issue of sameness and difference as the narrator and editor are acutely aware of the difference that separates them.

### Life Story / Social History

The fictionalized storytelling in *Here’s to You Jesusa* recreates the history of contemporary Mexico from the vantage point of a disenfranchised woman and serves as a counter-narrative to official versions of history. Jesusa’s life story mirrors the momentous periods of Mexico’s history and captures the indomitable spirit of the Mexican working class despite all its squalor and poverty. The text presents a polyphony of voices of the multitude of poor Mexican peasantry from the violent countryside and to the shanty towns of Mexico City. Jesusa is critical of popular Mexican beliefs and institutions like the church, family and military. In her irreverent tone and cynical style, she debunks many myths of the Mexican Revolution<sup>5</sup> and its heroes who have acquired a legendary status in the national imaginary.

Her narrative echoes the disappointment and betrayal of the alienated individuals of the Revolution, mostly women and children, who flocked to the slums of Mexico City after the Revolution. Jesusa wants people to know her role in the revolutionary project and the sacrifices made by her family. She was one of the ‘soldaderas’ of the Mexican Revolution, first in the infantry unit with her father in the army of Jesus Carranza and later in the cavalry unit with her husband. After losing her brother, father and husband in the Revolution, Jesusa finds herself thoroughly disenchanted with the revolutionary project, for it just killed too many people and failed to address the problems of the poor. “I think it was a misunderstood war because people killed each other, father against sons, brother against brother; Carrancistas, Villistas, Zapatistas.<sup>6</sup> We were all the same ragged people, starving to death”. However, that’s something that, as they say, you keep to yourself.” (93)

Jesusa’s life story gives the perspective of the working classes who were inducted into the Revolution but now find themselves alienated. Referring to the movies that glorify the Revolution, she says. “I do not know how they can brag about the shit they came up with”. (146) Highlighting the opportunism of political heroes she paints them as caricatures. Her complete distrust of political authority in Mexico stems from her belief that political leaders only have self-interest at heart and that poor people like her will be slaves all their lives to whoever came to power. “Everyone who comes takes a bite out of us, leaves us

maimed, toothless, crippled, and they make their homes out of the pieces of us that they bite off. And I don't go along with that, especially now that we're worse off than ever before." (80) Jesusa's distrust of authority, familial, religious and political is nowhere more apparent than her memory of the heroes of the Revolution. Of all the leaders, Emiliano Zapata scores the best as a leader, for he was interested in making people free and was not looking for any position of power. Pancho Villa fares the worst for the cruelty he inflicted on the civilians. Her encounter with Lazaro Cardenas reveals her utmost distrust of authority. She knew him as a soldier and then saw him again as the President of Mexico (1934–40):

He had been a Zapatista just like Mariscal, but when the Carrancistas took the port, everyone became a Carrancista. That's what the Revolution was like, I'm with this group now, but tomorrow I'll be with the other one; they changed uniforms like it was nothing, the trick was to be with the strongest group, the one that had the most ammunition ... It's like that now too. People court whoever has made it to the top. (69)

Jesusa's reflections on the Mexican Revolution and her criticism of all the factions and their opportunism shows the alienation of common people and the betrayal of the promises of the revolution. Her life story takes on a subversive dimension because in telling her story she recreates the history from the perspective of the marginalized and inscribes the view of those who had been written out of history. From a marginal figure, she becomes a figure of counter authority and the importance of her oral testimony is how she makes sense of the past and its impact on the present condition of her country. By encompassing such a slice of Mexican history, culture, and society Jesusa comes to embody the spirit of Mexico. Despite the disenchantment, she offers a perspective that does not allow any kind of sympathy and pity to be offered. Rather she takes the narrator by surprise by appearing to be on top of things. On one occasion, as Poniatowska points out in the introduction, Jesusa ripped up a photograph of herself because she did not like the image of herself that had been captured. She wanted a sepia-coloured photograph in a wooden frame, not the one that had been randomly taken. Jesusa "wanted to leave a serious image of herself, one of accomplishment." (xxiv). She did not want to be caught in a flippant mode, like laughing on a film. Poniatowska is right in admitting that "her reactions confused me." Despite suffering years of loneliness and neglect, Jesusa wants to have an image of her who is undaunted by her circumstances. Tough and cynical, she remains without any element of self-pity. On receiving the first draft of her life story from Poniatowska, Jesusa's snaps back, "What do I want this for? Get that piece of shit out of here." Jesusa is not moved by her story. However, she does take twenty copies of the book from Poniatowska and gives to the men at the shop where she worked so they'd know about her life and the "many precipices she had crossed, and so they'd have an idea of what the Revolution was like." (xiii)

Jesusa's picaresque life though makes for a great performance, masks her feelings and keeps the reader at a measured distance. Ruined by a lonely and loveless life, she pre-emptly any efforts toward intimacy and her fierce guarding of privacy masks her vulnerability. Referring to Poniatowska's term 'hermetic,' for Jesusa, Doris Sommer quotes Mexican poet Octavio Paz, who has identified the quintessential Mexican trait of solitude and quiet defensiveness. Paz writes:

The Mexican, whether young or old, criollo or mestizo, general labourer or lawyer, seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself; his face is a mask and so is his smile. In his harsh solitude, which is both barbed and courteous, everything serves him as a defence: silence and words, politeness and disdain, irony and resignation. He is jealous of his privacy and that of others, and he is afraid even to glance at his neighbour because a mere glance can trigger the rage of these electrically charged spirits. (cited in Sommer 149:1996)



Jesusa's enacts the anxieties as mentioned by Octavio Paz and Poniatowska admits that she never pried into Jesusa's privacy and never made her answer anything that she did not want to. Interestingly, Poniatowska herself feels the loss that she could not reveal the intensity of Jesusa's character. Doris Sommer raises an interesting question when she asks, "Does Jesusa want us to hear, or she wants us to keep at a safe distance?" (ibid. 150) Perhaps Jesusa's reticence works to her advantage, and she manages to negotiate the terms of representation without ever saying so. Despite all efforts on the part of Poniatowska, Jesusa never lets her have the claim to sisterhood, for she felt that there was an unbridgeable gulf that separated the two women. The only way to have control over herself was to keep others out of her private domain. Jesusa is not looking for any sympathy or understanding. While her story is a record of complete brutalization and oppression, she narrates it in a manner that gives her a sense of power and asserts her agency and humanity. "Though living on the edge of starvation, Jesusa's sense of pride becomes her source of strength."(xx). Despite the difficult and disadvantaged life, Jesusa's tells her story with wry humour and a rare capacity to surprise the reader with her ready wit and intelligence. Jesusa believes that she is guided by the voices of the dead but expects when she dies either to be reincarnated or condemned to hell. Fond of drinking and dancing she lives every moment of her life, on her terms, and does not have the slaving and fatalistic attitude of fellow Mexican women. Her faith in survival remains despite loss, alienation, and hardships and Jesusa's innate vitality and unbounded energy permeate the narrative.

Poniatowska's predicament is quite similar to her character Jesusa since both feel in their unique way that their country is indifferent to them. For Poniatowska, writing about Mexico and its history is a way of claiming a sense of belonging to a place where she perceived herself as an outsider. Despite all the challenges, Poniatowska stands to gain immensely from this collaboration as Jesusa's story has given her a sense of her own Mexican identity. "Something is being born inside me, something new that wasn't there before. . . . What was growing, although it may have been there for years, was my Mexican being, my becoming Mexican, feeling Mexico inside me."(xiv) Born in Paris in the year 1932 to a Mexican mother and French father of Polish origin, Poniatowska came from an aristocratic background. Her mother's family was landed gentry who lost their lands after the Mexican Revolution and her father's family were descendants of the last king of Poland. Constantly on the move, "the daughter of transatlantic travellers, the daughter of trains" Poniatowska came to Mexico when she was an eight-year girl, and learned Spanish from housemaids and nannies. For someone who always heard from her grandparents, "I don't belong", her identification with Jesusa, who embodied the spirit of Mexico, helped her discover her Mexican identity. Gaining strength from Jesusa's story, she could feel Mexico growing inside her, the same that was inside Jesusa. Overawed by Jesusa's wisdom, tenacity and strength, Poniatowska's testimonial novel is a glowing tribute to a woman who is too large to be contained and defies the stereotype Mexican woman of her class. Plagued by the powers of her agency and the gulf that separated them, the storytelling encounter creates a bond that restores their Mexican selves through warmth and friendship that develops between the two women and the relationship they develop beyond the text. Poniatowska concerns about collaboration prefigure ethical dilemmas that have become central to feminist ethnography. As Lila Abu-Lughod notes regarding the complexity of working with issues of sameness and difference that arise in feminist ethnography.

By working with the assumptions of difference in sameness, of a self that participates in multiple identifications, and an 'other' that is also partially the self, we might be moving beyond the impasse of the fixed self/other or subject/object divide that so disturbs the new ethnographers . . . The creation of a self through opposition to another is blocked. Therefore both the multiplicity of the self and the multiple, overlapping and interacting qualities of the other cannot be ignored. (1990: 25-26)



Abu-Lughod's observation is crucial to understanding the need to move beyond and bridge the self-other binary that characterises collaborative life writing amongst unequal relationship of power. Writing about lives that have been marginalized and forgotten is not just about honouring them but also a process of self-discovery, the possibility of a shared humanity. As Poniatowska remarks:

We write in Latin America to reclaim a space to discover ourselves in the presence of others, of the human community so that they may see us, so that they may love us—to form a vision of the world, to acquire some dimension—so that they cannot erase us so quickly.

We write so as not to disappear. (Cited in Winnsboro 158)

Poniatowska makes the above mentioned remark to express her anguish over the disappearances that occurred in the 1980s throughout Latin America but it points to ethical the responsibility and commitment that accompanies the act of writing. Known for her social and political commitment in all her journalistic and literary writings, making *Jesusa's* performatively bear witness to her life, is also a way of making her assert her agency and humanity was denied to her in her disadvantaged life. While ethical dilemmas are inbuilt in collaborative life writing, what is important is whether such writing can reconfigure power structures and destabilize the deeply engrained hierarchies and biases that inform such discourses. Collaboration highlights that there are limits to shared authority, as manifested in Poniatowska's narrative, but what is more significant is how are those limits negotiated and agreed upon.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). Couser categorizes a range of subjects as 'vulnerable', those who are writing about intimate relationships, celebrities, and ethnographic subjects who cannot represent themselves in writing.

<sup>2</sup> John Beverly is credited with the most widely used definition of testimonio. Beverly defines it as "a novel or novella-length narrative...told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts" and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience. (The Margin at the Center 'in *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press 2004)

<sup>3</sup> las soldaderas were female soldiers, 'fighters' who took part in the Mexican Revolution and their contribution to both the rebel and the federal armies was immense. While only a few took part in actual combat but their support to the male soldiers in terms of carrying goods, cooking meals, setting up campsites, carrying plants and animals made their contribution almost of a homemaker. Many wives also followed their husbands and did similar work. see Elizabeth Salas *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military*

<sup>4</sup> Miguel Barnet, *Biography of a Runaway Slave* is considered as the first Latin American testimonial novel, which recorded the life of the Esteban Montejo, a runaway slave. The novel won the Cuban Casa de las Americas prize.

<sup>5</sup> Mexican Revolution is one of the momentous periods of Mexican history, which took off in 1910 as an armed uprising against the long-term dictatorial ruler, Porfirio Diaz, became of the bloodiest struggles and caused immense destruction and changes the character of Mexican society. The revolution that lasted a decade (1910-1920), was not a unified struggle. It brought down the federal army and the rise of revolutionary leaders and their armies and almost created a situation of civil war.

<sup>6</sup> Carrancistas were one of the factions of the Mexican Revolution. Followers of Mexican President Venustiano Carranza (1913–14), this group comprised of urban intellectuals, middle-class liberals who wanted a constitutional form of government.

Villistas were the followers of Pancho Villa, (1878–1923) a Mexican revolutionary and guerrilla leader who was one of the many factions in the Revolution and fought against Porfirio Diaz.

Zapatistas were the followers of Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919) was a peasant leader who was, Mexican revolutionary, who fought guerilla wars in the Mexican revolution.

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# Life Narratives as Documentation of a Community: A Reading of K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* and the Context of Tamil Dalit Life Narratives

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B. MANGALAM

**Abstract:** This paper argues that life narratives written by Dalits form a distinct sub-genre in terms of content and form. They seek to document not one individual's life history but situate it in the context of one's community's living conditions over a life time. The conflation of the personal and the communitarian struggles, aspirations, negotiations with the mainstream casteist, discriminatory social structure is the defining core of Dalit life narratives. The narrator articulates a historical perspective to the continued struggle for social justice by his/her community. The narrator's personal graph is a social documentation of his/her community's marginalisation, oppression by the dominant communities and the challenging of prevailing caste hierarchies.

K.A. Gunasekaran's autobiography, *Vadu* (Scar), 2005, is a sociological document of Tamil society and the prevailing caste matrix. Weaving together his parents' struggle for survival, the discrimination faced by him at educational institutions and experiences of members of his community, K.A. Gunasekaran relies upon stone inscriptions, oral narratives, personal and collective memory in his writing. The use of photographs, folk songs, polyphonic voices and a non-linear narrative posit *Vadu* as an engaging life narrative that offers an insightful social critique and a historical perspective on the question of caste hegemony.

An analysis of *Vadu* takes us through Ambedkarite thought and its influence in the struggle for social justice as reflected in the life of a community. The individual's narrative forms a significant but non-privileged discourse that reflects growth, change and success in his community's fortunes as much as his own.

**Keywords:** Marginalisation, collective memory, sociological document, non-linear narrative, caste hierarchy, Dalit life narratives

Dalit literary discourse in Tamil is polyphonic, vibrant and a self-reflexive discourse. Its critical engagement with mainstream Tamil literature has given rise to innovative experimentation in form, content, linguistic register and a radical re-configuration of aesthetics. Dalit discourse politicises the personal by positing it as communitarian. The individual or the personal narrative is represented as a narrative about the community. The collective voice of the Dalit community, its struggles, aspirations and accomplishments get reflected in the narrator's lived experience. The narrator's resistance against casteist discrimination, oppressive social practices reflect the community's ways of coping, enduring and ways of standing up against the age-old structures of oppression and marginalisation of Dalits, in rural and urban Indian spaces. The subjectivity of the narrator is mediated through the collective consciousness of the community. Simultaneously, the narrative reveals an individuated, distinctive subjectivity of the narrator as a critically evolved and self-reflexive one from the oppressed community. The narrator's interventions, acts of resistance, help the self and the community emerge from traditional structures of oppression.

This paper will attempt to probe those points of conflation, otherness and solidarity between the narrator and his community in Dalit life narratives. Although the milestones reached by the individual in terms of social success or validation is a matter of community celebration, the condition of the community, however, requires more interventions and a sustained movement to resist recurring acts of oppression. Dalit life narratives, therefore, are formally and fundamentally different from mainstream autobiographies/ memoirs that depict rags to riches tale of personal progress and self-aggrandisement.

Dalit autobiography, thus, emerges as a sub-genre that testifies to the unequal social matrix of contemporary India. It seeks to document the condition of our society, of the Dalit community in particular, and records how inextricably yoked it is to a rigid caste structure. Dalit life narratives engage in a dialogue with the non-Dalit reader as much as they seek to reach out to the Dalit community. They offer an authenticated, lived reality of rural and urban social negotiation of caste, gender, religious and national markers or intersecting hegemonies. Dalit autobiography evolved as a popular genre in the seventies and eighties in Marathi and consolidated the Dalit discourse as articulating experiential reality. However, in Tamil, Dalit literature revealed a greater inclination towards other genres like poetry, short fiction, novel or drama. Autobiography/Life Narrative did not emerge in Tamil Dalit literary discourse until the beginning of this century. Bama's *Karukku* (1992), written in the confessional/ experiential mode, is a landmark in Dalit literary discourse for its radical defiance of literary formulations and genre categorisation. Locating *Karukku* in the catalogues of renowned libraries is quite revealing as some of them stack the text as a novel while others place it in the section on Autobiography! Bama, like many other Dalit writers in Tamil, problematises received notions of genre, form, style and principles of aesthetics. Autobiography or Life Narratives as a genre did not gain Tamil Dalit writers' attention in the nineties, a period when Tamil Dalit writing garnered critical and popular attention. In this context, K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* (2005: tr. *The Scar*: 2009) emerges as the first Dalit Life Narrative in Tamil. (1)

K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* does not have a literary predecessor in contemporary Dalit literature in Tamil. However, it shares affinity with Rettamalai Srinivasan's (1859–1914) *Jeeviya Sarithira Surukkam* (A Brief History of My Life), published in 1939. An associate of Gandhi in South Africa, Srinivasan was a representative of the Depressed Classes in the Round Table Conferences held in 1930–32 and worked in close coordination with Ambedkar. He founded a journal, *Paraiyan*, in 1893 to give voice to the Parayar community, negotiated with the colonial government to grant access to roads and wells for Dalit communities. The Dalit community was one of the pioneers in founding journals and submitting petitions for reform in the second half of the nineteenth century in Tamil Nadu. The movement for social justice associated with the Dravidian movement came into being much later. (2) The Dravidian movement spearheaded by Periyar in the first half of the twentieth century and its foray into electoral politics after Independence sought to subsume the pioneering efforts by the Dalit community in the context of negotiating modernity, in particular, in the domain of the print media or the community's efforts towards greater representation in governance in the colonial administration. This resulted in poor documentation of the Parayar community's efforts for social reform. The neglect towards archival records of the journal *Paraiyan* is one such instance. Srinivasan's representation to the Governor-General, resolutions initiated by him in the Assembly and the petitioning of the community to British Parliament for holding the civil services exams in London are some of the significant interventions in challenging the hegemony of the elite upper castes in the bureaucracy. This carries historical significance for the community and adds an alternative layering to our perspective on the nationalist movement. The path of granting representation to Dalits in legislative bodies or reservation

in the bureaucracy and educational institutes was shaped by the efforts of Rettamalai Srinivasan and the Parayar Mahasabha (subsequently renamed Adi Dravidar Sabha) founded by him in 1892. The journal *Paraiyan*, was instrumental in forging a community identity and self-esteem to the Parayar community. Parayar Mahajana Sabha, under his leadership, felicitated Lord Elgin, the governor-general in 1893, during his visit to Chennai. This gesture strengthened the political identity of the community as “a distinct caste group” (3). As a member of the Legislative Assembly, Rettamalai Srinivasan initiated resolutions that demanded access to public buildings, markets, roads for Dalit communities. He also ensured that the Madras Municipality began running schools for children of oppressed castes. These facts are retrieved from his *A Brief History of My Life* that documents his work for his community in detail, and highlights his faith in legislative processes to bargain for greater representation and civic rights for Dalits. While Ambedkar’s *Autobiographical Notes*, published in the same year as Srinivasan’s *Brief History* (1939), has received much critical attention as *Waiting for a Visa*, Srinivasan’s work became readily available to Dalits only in recent years (as late as 2002). The journal, *Dalit*, published an excerpt in Tamil in 2002, and an annotated critical edition of *Jeeviya Sariththira Surukkam* was brought out in 2017. (4) A biography of Srinivasan was published in 2011, authored by G. Thangavelu. The absence of a well-sustained tradition of Dalit life narratives in Tamil could be traced to such silences, gaps and neglect of influential pioneers of Dalit community who played an active role in nationalist movement, social reform and for the upliftment of the community. Their farsighted, activist interventions in the domain of Dalit rights and legal guarantees were ignored, unrecorded in accounts pertaining to nationalist movement and Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. This led to a subsuming of Dalit cause and self-articulation within the *Kazhagam* movement that focussed more on linguistic identity and regional autonomy rather than on ensuring equal opportunities for the oppressed communities.

L. Elayaperumal’s life narrative, *Cittirai Neruppu* (Flames of Summer), documents the struggles of poor, agricultural labourers from the Dalit community in the 1940s. His protest movements against the inhuman exploitation of the Adi Dravidians by the Brahmin, Naidu, Vanniyar, Reddiar landlords underscores the hegemony of caste rubric in rural Tamil Nadu that went unchecked during the peak of the anti-colonial nationalist movement. Elayaperumal documents how Dalits were not allowed to wear “neat clothes and stylish haircut”, punished for “trespassing caste norms” by being tied up to trees for days and beaten up severely by their upper-caste landlords. (5) He also records casteist discrimination at mealtimes in college hostels, Army mess and the official neglect in administering inoculation programmes. He recounts the deaths of his father and foster-mother on the same day, as the Panchayat board officials refused to sanitise the streets inhabited by the Adi Dravidian community or inoculate its residents against cholera. The book is an important document on institutionalised casteist discrimination in Tamil Nadu, before and after Independence. The nomenclature of Adi Dravidian in place of Parayar as used more often, earlier, by Rettamalai Srinivasan is indicative of evolving politicization of identity during the late nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century. The pan-Indian use of the term Dalit gets crystallised much later in Tamil Dalit discourse, coinciding with the centenary celebration of Ambedkar in 1990. L. Elayaperumal (1924–2005) worked for the rights of the marginalised castes to lead a life of dignity. He organized protests against the casteist practices like the beating of the *Parai* drum, removing of the carcass that were imposed upon Paraiyar and other lower caste communities. He represented the Congress party in the first Lok Sabha but had an unstable equation with it until 2003 when he re-joined the party. His life narrative, like Srinivasan’s, is an important documentation of an individual’s organized movement of protest against multiple facets of casteist discrimination in institutional spaces through the channels of constitutional guarantees.

Both Srinivasan and Elayaperumal conflate the personal and the communitarian engagements with caste, documenting the struggles, lived experiences of the community in their writing. Their narratives adopt the structure of a document that serves as a testimonial of a representative voice of the community on behalf of the community. As they share their individual interventions in the movement, they foreground the community's struggle, the processes of the protest over denial of education to Dalits, the fight against unequal wages on the grounds of caste and gender. Their documentation of defiance of imposed identities on the oppressed communities takes precedence over detailing of the personal or a biographical profiling of the self. Elayaperumal's *Cittirai Neruppu* was published by a Dalit publishing house in 1998. Other genres like the novel, poetry, essay, plays written by Dalit writers had garnered critical attention in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Elayaperumal's life narrative, thus, assumes greater significance as a documentation of the struggles of the community that offers a historical perspective to the corpus of contemporary Dalit literature.

K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* (2005) is the first life narrative in Tamil that affirms the Parayar identity and space in the cultural domain in contemporary Dalit literary discourse. His documentation of the *Cheri* (Dalit hamlet) in rural, semi-urban spaces is a significant intervention in foregrounding a systematised marginalisation that remains neglected in post-liberalisation India despite its disturbing, ubiquitous presence. Gunasekaran renders a visualised representation in his life narrative of spaces, physical structures/buildings/institutions that push Dalit communities to a ghettoised social space, denying its inhabitants, civic rights and social interaction with the mainstream society. He documents modes of labour allowed and disallowed to Dalits by the oppressor community and how an exploitative attitude towards the intellectual, artistic strengths and physical labour of Dalits continues in Independent India in utter violation of constitutional guarantees. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* lays bare the continuities in practices regarding social segregation, denial of fair wages to specific castes, discrimination against Dalit students at hostels, at dining halls in school hostels and violence against Parayars in rural spaces including fields, markets and the pathways which intersect fields and the village, effectively blocking accessibility to the *Cheri*. He recounts his life from childhood to his days at the University, the struggles of his parents to educate their children, his face-offs with casteist discrimination at different points during his growing-up years. The book also depicts the marshalling of his talents as a performer to resist caste hegemony. It is disconcerting to note that the practices opposed by the Parayar community under the leadership of Rettamalai Srinivasan in the 1890s and under Elayaperumal in the 1940s continue to prevail in the 1960s and the late seventies as depicted in Gunasekaran's *Vadu*. The book concludes with a harsh reminder that the modes of critique deployed during Gunasekaran's student days as pertinent at the time of publishing his life narrative, when he was the Dean and Professor at the School of Performing Arts in Pondicherry University (6). Dalit life narratives in Tamil act as revealing documentation and critique of caste oppression that continue to control a social culture like that of Tamil Nadu where anti-caste movements rose in a far more substantive way than elsewhere in India. Life narratives, in such a context, function as a stringent critique of those institutions that are cited as the pride of our Republic but have failed to uphold those democratic ideals. *Vadu* points out how no substantial gains have filtered down to the Dalits inhabiting the *Cheri* in contemporary India. A juxtaposing of Srinivasan's *Jeeviya Sarithira Surukkam* (1939) and *Vadu* (2005) shows us recurring patterns of oppression, recounted by two eminent public intellectuals of their times. Life narratives, therefore, require to be posited as the most damning, graphic and subversive critique of our social structures, in particular, the inflexible caste structure that undermines the discourse of democracy, development and civic rights.



Life narrative as documentation of a community's place and status in our society is a subversive, non-official record that merits attention as a citizen's alternative version of authenticating the lived reality of an individual, of a community, and that of the nation. The individual from the oppressed community, in this instance, the Parayar community from Tamil Nadu, is not recounting merely his personal tale of struggle and success but locates the same in the context of the social, economic, cultural conditions of his community within a historical timeframe. While Srinivasan and the Parayar community petitioned the colonial government for civic amenities, political representation and the right to education, Gunasekaran negotiates a more formidable task of recording the denial of rights to Parayars by his fellow citizens from educational institutions and centres of religion in a secular, democratic republic where equal rights and opportunities to all citizens are guaranteed by the Constitution. He also documents the nexus between socially privileged communities and official institutions in perpetuating discrimination against the socially marginalised communities.

The Paraiyar *Cheri*, located on the outskirts or beyond the *oor* ensures the spatial and cultural alienation of the Dalit community from the mainstream social life as shown in *Vadu*. Gunasekaran grows up in the villages of Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu. His father is a school teacher, his maternal grandfather is the village veterinarian, but the family lives in acute poverty and deprivation. Despite the respect towards the profession of teaching and medicine in rural India, his father and grandfather are subjected to humiliation and abjectness on account of their caste. Gunasekaran's schooling and his stay at a hostel meant for 'Harijan' students from the district leave him sour with memories of heckling, caste-shaming and denial of a decent meal or personal toiletries despite the government dole received by these institutions. Unable to pay the rent for their one-room hutment, barely eating one meal a day or sharing soaked and peeled tamarind seeds with his siblings as breakfast, sustaining his schooling by borrowing books from upper-caste students, receiving charity from their Muslim neighbours to pay the school fees – these memories are recounted by the writer as facts that defined the living conditions of his large family and those of his neighbours in the *Cheri* (2005:29–35).

Gunasekaran's depiction of his neighbourhood offers an inclusive society, albeit one that brings together multiple marginalised communities of Muslims, Christians and Dalits. Gunasekaran's comradery with homebound Muslim women during his childhood and adolescence unravels loads of fun, storytelling and affectionate conversations. The women trust him, treat him as a member of the household, send him on errands to get snacks for them and share the same with him. Often, they ask him to eat first at the shop and bring home the eats for them. They give him money to watch a movie and narrate the story to them as they sit down to weave mats (2005:37–38). The most endearing sections of the book relate to his association with the Muslim neighbours or putting up a play, singing songs during Christmas with his friends. The absence of unease among Parayars, Muslims and Christians acts as a critical pointer on the prevalence of caste amongst Hindus. Gunasekaran's parents counsel their children to not reveal their caste in public but identify themselves as Christians to avoid a backlash, a violent assault on their bodies. Gunasekaran recalls how as a young lad returning home with a bottle of cooking oil, singing merrily to keep thoughts of loneliness away, he was violently pushed down, slapped hard and abused for walking on the village pathway and not stepping aside to let an upper-caste man have his right of way. He is shocked out of his wits as he cannot comprehend the rationale behind the violence heaped upon him:

"Why did that fellow slap me? What wrong have I done? Why did he abuse me as a wretched Paraiyan? Such questions crossed my mind but I could get no answer... My cheek got swollen and flushed by the time I reached home. I broke down when I narrated what had

happened to me to my *ammachi* ... She consoled me and explained that we are Parayars who need to make way for the masters and mistresses who have the right of way... She wiped my tears with the *mundhanai* of her sari and applied castor oil on my swollen cheek." (2005: 71, translation mine).

Even boys of his age from the upper caste slap Gunasekaran for singing merrily or winning a game. These oppressive acts that seek to undermine the self-esteem of Parayars, to show them their place in a hierarchical, feudal society, are resisted by Gunasekaran by pursuing his studies under the most trying circumstances and by honing his talent of singing and play-acting. His repeated encounters with casteist discrimination enable him to evolve a rationalist analysis of the social structure and not wallow in the discourse of self-pity or resentment against his oppressors. He notes how the hegemonic, hierarchical social matrix pits each community against another, how his immediate oppressor is placed in a subordinate position in relation to another and such a context proves to be further exclusionary and discriminating at multiple levels. He records the colossal grip of the caste structure over his community despite changing times, location and altered social standing, regardless of accomplishments by way of acquiring a professional degree, higher education, success in business or a place in the cabinet.

Gunasekaran's cousin, Muniyandi, is a qualified doctor who works at a hospital in Madurai, provides diligent attention and medical care to upper caste patients from his village. They are happy in receiving the best possible treatment in a strange city on account of 'our village boy Muniyandi'. However, while they address him respectfully as 'doctor thambi' within the hospital premises or request him to deliver medicines to them whenever he visits the village, at the bus depot, they treat him with disdain, address him disparagingly and make it plain that he is only a Paraiyan who deserves no respect or a courteous greeting from them. (2005: 91-93) A Dalit couple's wedding procession is not allowed to enter the village pathway, the only motorable road that could let their car reach their home in the Cheri. Both the bride and the groom are working as teachers, the bride's father is a minister but the upper caste villagers force the couple to get off the car. Gunasekaran's grandfather, a Vaidya, reminds them (most of them his regular clients) that Paraiyars are employed as drivers and drive their cars to drop them at their doorstep through the same pathway. They retort, "Look here, Karuppa! We can take the car to our residences but how dare you expect us to watch your fellows enjoy a car ride through our area?... Caste does not vanish on getting educated... If you manage to read and write, does that mean you could forget the traditions and practices of our village?" (2005:84, translation mine).

Caste structure impacts Dalit women's lives the most. The fact of the intersectionality of gender and caste as well as a critique of Dalit patriarchy found a voice in the writings of Tamil Dalit literature right from the 1990s when the writings of Bama and Sivakami stormed the literary domain. Gunasekaran's plays invariably reflect a self-reflexive critique of the dual oppression of Dalit women on the grounds of caste and gender. In his life narrative too, he foregrounds the incessant labour of Dalit women and its undermining by the employers and by Dalit men at home. He recounts the fate of a Dalit woman Mikelamma who is beheaded by her Odayar lover when she points out to him that the possibility of an inter-caste marriage is ruled out as his community would wipe off her family owing to their identity as Pallars. The lover hacks her head off, for he cannot take a "no" from a Dalit woman. We are told that he was working as an attendant at a hospital after completing his jail term, but his gruesome act put an end to the possibility of inter-caste marriages in the district. Mikelamma's tragic life is heard as a ballad in the nearby villages, sung by women while working in the fields -- sowing, transplanting or harvesting.

How does Gunasekaran cope with the pressures of caste during his student days? What are his strategies of resistance? It is interesting to note that Gunasekaran resists caste

oppression primarily through the dynamics of performativity. Performing the Dalit is evolved by him as a mode of resistance, a subversive praxis to make a dent in the domain of culture and social role-play, contexts most impacted by the rigours of caste. Gunasekaran as a folk singer, composer and practitioner of theatre, fuses folk arts practised by Dalits to subvert casteist hegemony, initiates a dialogue with the oppressor as his auditor and spectator. His singing wins him awards, fame and the hearts of fellow students from dominant castes. At college fests, he sings undeterred by the hooting and heckling on account of his caste, winning prizes and wins over the hearts of his social “betters”. The notion of merit and privilege is subverted by Gunasekaran by positing his Dalit identity as an empowering one by politicising performativity. Folk performative arts like Karagattam, Oyilattam, Paraiyattam are deployed in his plays to subvert mainstream, classical arts that have enjoyed unquestioned hegemony in Tamil cultural space. The drumming of the Parai, imposed upon the Paraiyar community as a demeaning task, is problematised by Gunasekaran. He posits it as an art form in his theatre. He choreographs movements of the drummers and synchronises its beats with the body language of the actors to indicate affirmation of Paraiyar identity, instead of camouflaging it to escape social derision or segregation. His popularity as a singer of folk melodies, of Bharathi’s songs, the recitation of his poems or participation at literary talks and workshops at Madurai University pave the way for social acceptability and validation on account of his “talent/skills”: “my caste took a backseat, and I won accolades as a performer.” (2005: 97) Students from oppressive castes reach out to him, pen down apology notes, and this strengthens his resolve to subvert caste in the domain of culture and public performances. The choice of his name as an artiste at the AIR is “Elayankudi Gunasekaran”, much to the chagrin of upper-caste villagers of Marandai, his birth place. His argument that Elayankudi Muslims do not practise caste segregation or untouchability and hence he would affirm his affinity with them makes his village *savarna* landlords squirm in pain and discomfort. *Vadu* concludes with a reference to Gunasekaran’s founding of a *Kalai Kuzhu*, *Tannane*, his very own troupe to disseminate folk arts, Dalit performative arts and theatre.

Gunasekaran’s life narrative fuses the personal and the political consciousness, the individual and community’s experiential reality in his documentation of struggles and subversions in the context of oppression of Dalits. An incident reported by his cousin Muniyandi is rendered as a play *Thodu* by Gunasekaran a few years later. A well-known, much performed and translated play, *Thodu* is based on Muniyandi’s experience that is at once bizarre, absurd and provoking. He notices a farmer lying unconscious in his field and suffering from an epileptic seizure. As a medical student, Muniyandi rushes to help the farmer, a Konar (a caste equivalent to the Yadav in the North). Muniyandi fans with a towel, lifts him and lays him down under the shade of a tree and sprinkles water from the Konar’s *Kanji* pot to revive him. The farmer regains his consciousness and throws a fit, this time, a non-clinical one. He abuses Muniyandi for being a wretched Paraiyan who dared to touch him and his pot. He asserts that he would have preferred to die rather than be touched by a Paraiyan. (The term *thodu* in Tamil connotes touch, as an operative verb.) The Konar farmer summons the Panchayat that sympathises with him and holds Muniyandi arrogant and high-handed towards his betters. “Why did you touch me? Why did you carry me in your arms? ... Your conduct reeks of arrogance... being educated ...” (2005:89, translation mine). The Panchayat lets him off as he is the grandson of the village Vet, Karuppan. Nonetheless, Muniyandi is made to fall at the complainant’s feet and apologise. His humane gesture to help a patient is challenged by the hegemonic caste as untenable and unacceptable. The touch of an untouchable (in the late sixties or mid-seventies) is perceived to be a criminal act that gets resolved by the Panchayat, dominated by the hegemonic castes. The due process of the law is not invoked or adhered to and the

verdict is biased and humiliating to the Dalit community. It is an utter mockery and betrayal of our constitution and institutions of governance.

Gunasekaran weaves this incident into a social critique in his play, *Thodu*. He focuses on the body language, silence and drumming of the Parai instead of dialogue and narrative. The absence of verbal communication foregrounds the silences, spatial distancing between the communities that get ruptured by an act of touch by a Dalit. The placing of the mud pot at the centre of the stage serves as a visual symbol of the privilege of touch. A Dalit character protests in the play, “We may touch a goat, a dog or even a pig. But can we touch our fellow men?” (7). The use of Parai drum in many of Gunasekaran’s plays offers a subtext of identity affirmation, a celebration of Paraiyar culture. The use of songs, masks, synchronised movements of actors and subversive humour are the chief markers of Gunasekaran’s theatre. His *Vadu* incorporates subversion by politicising performativity and positing it as a marker of Dalit protest culture.

Dalits employ writing as an act of resistance. Dalits have been denied access to education for centuries but the right to equal opportunities as a constitutional provision is looked at as an act of condescension by a feudal, hierarchical society that invokes “merit” as its cultural capital, while the Dalits struggle hard to acquire formal education. Gunasekaran’s trajectory in his life narrative is, at once, an extraordinary and an unexceptional one. The simultaneity of the general and the particular condition of Dalit life/lives reflects the core of *Vadu*, in terms of content and form, in its narrative and structure.

This life narrative avoids a teleological perspective and is structured in an episodic, non-linear mode of narrative. It documents an individual’s life as typical of his community’s lived experience. A collage of narratives on Dalit lives of the young and the aged men and women from both rural and urban spaces of our society is represented in *Vadu*. Its representation mirrors the shackles of a tradition and worldview interrogated by the oppressed who affirm their share over this land, culture and a right over its institutional spaces. Gunasekaran’s *Vadu* is remarkable in its use of photographs of structures — ruined temples that have risen over demolished Viharas, rare statues of Buddha, Tirthankara jostling for space in a Shiva temple as evidence of violent friction and appropriation of spaces. There are photographs of a Dargah and a Church affirming a pluralistic, inclusive lifestyle available to Dalit communities. An image of a mosque with a *baoli* invokes access to water bodies through non-Hindu spaces for Dalits who are forced to live beyond the caste-bound, Hindu Oor/village. Years ago, Rettamalai Srinivasan had observed that Dalits are “a distinct caste group”, outside the fold of Hinduism (2012:182). Hence, he did not, unlike Ambedkar, feel the need for conversion. Gunasekaran assimilates an inclusive but rationalist identity wherein he presents the Islamic, Christian and Hindu community bonds, celebrating the festivals, literature and their arts to affirm his faith in a humane, non-sectarian social vision. His social identity is constructed as a performer, a folk-artist, a theatre practitioner who initiates a dialogue with the oppressor community, interrogates social inequalities through the medium of art, writing and performance. The core principle of his writing lies in the affirmation of performing the Dalit as an identity and conviction to offer a subversive critique of oppressive structures.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ravikumar's foreword to K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu*. (Gunasekaran. K.A. *Vadu*. Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2005, p.16). All subsequent references to *Vadu* are to this edition, translation mine for the purpose of this paper, hereafter incorporated in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> For a more detailed reading of this context: <https://m.thewire.in/article/caste/remembering-rettamalai-srinivasan-the-lasting-emblem-of-dalit-political-aspirations?utm=authorpage>. visited on 18.9.2021 at 11.15 hrs. <https://www.epw.in/node/156379/pdf>. Accessed 18 Sept 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> *Tamil Dalit Writing* ed. Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan. Delhi: OUP, 2012, p.182.
- <sup>4</sup> An excerpt of *Jeeviya Sariththira Surukkam* was published in *Dalit*, May-July, 2002, pp.44-62; an annotated, critical edition, *Jeeviya Sariththira Surukkam* ed. Stalin Rajangam, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> Elayaperumal, L. *Cittirai Neruppu* (Flames of Summer), Neyveli: Dalit Veliyeedu, 1998; excerpted in *Tamil Dalit Writing*. eds. Ravikumar & Azhagarasan. Delhi: OUP, 2012, p.192.
- <sup>6</sup> Gunasekaran concludes by quoting from the poem, *Manusangada*, written by the Marxist revolutionary Poet Inquilab:  
 "We are men, we are your fellow-men / Like you, like him, like her / ...our bones and flesh burning in the fire that you set aflame / Your government and your courts add oil to its flames / You announce random schemes in the name of welfare / But when they burnt us alive / With whom were you bloody busy fornicating?" (As quoted in *Vadu*, 2005, p.127, translation mine).
- <sup>7</sup> K.A. Gunasekaran. *Thodu*. (Chennai: Thamarai, 2004) p.54, translation mine.

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# Stories of Two Gandhians: Reading Caste and Gender in Odia Autobiographies

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**Abstract:** The idea of India is closely associated with the concepts of caste and gender. With the emergence of the Women's movement and Dalit movement across India, we have new perspectives to understand Indian society, culture and literature in a better way. The objective of this essay is to read caste and gender issues in two Odia autobiographies written by two Gandhians: Ramadevi Choudhuri (1899-1985) and Nishakar Das (1927). Ramadevi was a famous Gandhian from Odisha. Like M.K. Gandhi, she devoted a significant part of her life to India's Freedom Movement. In post-independent India, she undertook several constructive works for the upliftment of the rural, tribal and underprivileged people of Odisha. Her Odia autobiography, *Jiban Pathe* (1984), which is translated into English as *Into the Sun: An Autobiography* (1998) is a unique autobiographical document about her life and time. Nishakar Das, on the other hand, is a poor Dalit whose evolution to become a Gandhian has prompted him to write a short autobiography, *Kharasuanru Kulabiri* (Odia, 2006), which has been translated into English as *From Kharsuan to Kulabiri: A Journey through Life*. Influenced by Gandhian ideals, Nishakar joined in the Bhoodan movement of Odisha and undertook social works. In his autobiography he narrates about village reconstruction works among the Adivasis and Dalits in Koraput, one of the most backward districts of Odisha. Both the autobiographies give exciting accounts of caste and gender dynamics in Odisha.

**Keywords:** Caste, gender, Dalit, lower caste, Gandhian, Bhoodan Movement, Odia, Odisha

The idea of India is closely associated with the concepts of caste and gender. With the emergence of Women's movement and Dalit movement across India, we have new perspectives to understand Indian society, culture and literature in a better way. My attempt in this essay is to read caste and gender issues in two Odia autobiographies written by two Gandhians: Ramadevi Choudhuri (1899-1985) and Nishakar Das (1927). Ramadevi was a famous Gandhian from Odisha. Like M.K. Gandhi, she devoted a significant part of her life to India's Freedom Movement. In post-independent India she undertook several constructive works for the upliftment of the rural, tribal and underprivileged people of Odisha. Her Odia autobiography, *Jiban Pathe* (1984) which is translated into English as *Into the Sun: An Autobiography* (1998) is a unique autobiographical document about her life and time. Nishakar Das, on the other hand, is a poor Dalit whose evolution to become a Gandhian has prompted him to write a short autobiography, *Kharasuanru Kulabiri* (Odia, 2006), which has been translated into English as *From Kharsuan to Kulabiri: A Journey through Life*. Influenced by Gandhian ideals, Nishakar joined in the Bhoodan movement of Odisha and undertook social works. In his autobiography, he narrates about village reconstruction works among the Adivasis and Dalits in Koraput, one of the most backward districts of Odisha. Though ideologically, both Ramadevi and Nishakar are Gandhians, socio-culturally, they are different in many ways. While Ramadevi belonged to a reputed and well established upper caste family of Odisha, Nishakar comes from a poor Dalit background. So how do we read their autobiographies? Being Gandhians, do they cherish



the same ideals, or do they differ from each other? What are their visions about Odia society? How do they construct their private selves while narrating their public lives? Do they evoke any caste and gender issues in their respective autobiographies? These and many other questions will be addressed while critically analysing their autobiographies. But before we begin to analyse their autobiographies, let us briefly discuss Odia society and culture so that we can place these two autobiographies in their proper perspectives.

### Odia Society and Culture: An Overview

Odisha is unique in more than one way. Geographically it is divided between the coastal plains and the western hills. Odisha has a long sea coast, several mountains, plateaus, rivers and forests and thousands hectares of fertile cultivable agricultural lands. These geographical settings contribute to the making of Odisha's economy and culture in various ways. Though the state has rich mineral resources, neither the state nor the central government has been able to utilise these resources for the economic progress of the state. As a result, Odisha has remained backward economically throughout these years. A majority of the population in the state have remained poor and underprivileged. The Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward classes combine eighty five percent of the total population of the state. In spite of being a majority, they are powerless: be it social, economic or political spheres. On the other hand, the upper castes such as the Brahmins, Karanas and Khandayats, who constitute only fifteen per cent population of the state, have been ruling Odisha for several decades now. Since the upper castes do not want to lose their powers, there is status quo in politics and development in the state. So Odia society continues to be feudal in many aspects despite India having a progressive and democratic Constitution.

There were several organised protest movements against the caste system in Odisha. Buddhism which emerged in the fourth century BC as a protesting religion against the Hindu religion, had widespread presence in Odisha beginning from the third century BC. It was in the aftermath of the Kalinga war which was held in 261 BC that the emperor Ashoka became a Buddhist in the Odisha soil. Several Buddhist sites are located in Odisha even today: be it Khandagiri, Udayagiri, Dhauligiri, Ratnagiri, Pushpagiri, etc. to name a few. The remaining of these Buddhist sites suggests that Buddhism was once a popular religion in the state.

The evidence of Buddhism also can be found in the *Charyapadas*, the songs of the Nath-Yogis. The Nath-Yogis were the Buddhist Sidhas who moved from village to village begging alms, singing ballads and bhajanas rich with moral and spiritual lore, approximately between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Hadi Pa, Kanhu Pa, Tanti Pa, Chaurangi Nath, Gorakh Nath, Mahendra Nath or Lui Pa, the authors of the *Charyas*, are well known among the Nath sect of saints and constitute a distinct social tradition in Odisha. Under the patronage of the Hindu kings, Odia Buddhism gradually lost its hold over the people. But there is evidence that the poet-saints of the *Charyapadas* profoundly influenced later poets. Thus a tradition of protest is quite explicit in Odia literature, especially among the poets who wrote in anger against social inequalities and injustices through popular and very effective literary creations.

In the medieval time beginning from the fifteenth century, it was Sudra Muni Sarala Das who began to write on caste issues in his famous puranas: the *Odia Mahabharata*, *Bilanka Ramayana*, and *Chandi Purana*. Following Sarala Das Panchasakhas, the five fellow-saint poets: Balarama Dasa, Jagannatha Dasa, Achyutananda Dasa, Jasobanta Dasa and Ananta Dasa, who dominated Odia literature and society for a century (1450-1550) went on raising caste and gender questions both in public as well as in their literary creations. Balarama Dasa's *Laxmi Purana* is considered to be an early literary text raising issues on

gendered equality. Further, in the nineteenth century Bhima Bhoi, a tribal poet and activist, protested against the upper caste monopolies by creating a new religious order called Mahima dharma which was attracted by Dalits, Adivasis, lower castes and women of all communities, including widows. In the post-independence time, Dalits in Odisha brought caste, class and gender debates in the public spheres by writing Dalit literature and protested against caste injustices, class inequalities and the patriarchal system. In spite of regular protests against caste, class and patriarchy, no structural changes came in the social, economic and political order of the state.

In most recent years, when people throughout the world are celebrating freedom Odia society, it seems, is going through a crisis. Social scientist like Manoranjan Mohanty has the following observations to make,

Odisha presents a crisis of democracy with upper caste, patriarchal domination that has been consolidated through the formation and expansion of a middle class, which provides services to the capitalist extractive economy while vast sections of the population, especially adivasis, dalits, and agricultural workers, remained marginalised. This process has been accentuated during the recent decades of neo-liberal policies, during which the scale and magnitude of mining-based industries and their implementation through a massive deployment of security forces have hugely grown. The strategy has done little to reduce the regional disparity between the coastal districts and inland regions. This system of dominance and governance has been legitimised through the electoral process, welfare support, and the media. (Mohanty 46)

The observations made in the above paragraph are certainly detrimental to the already burdensome lives of the poor Dalits, Adivasis and women of Odisha who always bear the brunt. In that scenario, what can be a way out? It may be emphasised here that the political economy of Odisha entirely depends on their labour. And yet, they are the ones who are mostly deprived of their basic needs. The two Odia autobiographies chosen for discussion in the present essay give some accounts of how Dalits, lower castes, and women cope with their lives. Before we start analysing these two autobiographies, let us briefly discuss the emergence of the autobiographical tradition in Odisha.

### **Odia Autobiographical Tradition**

Odia is recognised as one of the Indian classical languages. Odia literature has been written since the fifteenth century AD. Poetry, short stories and novels are some of the popular literary genres. But the genre of autobiography evolved quite late. To be precise, with the coming of Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Atmajivana Charita* (Autobiography) in 1917, there began a trend in Odisha to write one's life story. In the meantime, several autobiographies have been written by writers, politicians, social reformers, bureaucrats, lawyers, artists, sportspersons, and academics. These autobiographies are mostly written by the upper caste men and women who are privileged to speak to the world. However, Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalised sections of Odia society have not attempted to write their life stories as education was not available to them earlier due to the stringent Hindu caste laws. Only after India's independence, the Indian Constitution made provisions for compulsory education for all children till the age of fourteen. But even after seven decades of the enactment of the Indian Constitution, literacy among the marginalised sections of Odisha is abysmally low. Therefore there are not many autobiographies written by the members of the marginalised communities.

As mentioned earlier, Fakir Mohan's *Atmajivana Charita* is considered to be the first Odia autobiography. Even before Fakir Mohan, Radhanath Rai seems to have published a part of his autobiography titled *Atmanibedana* (1907). Since Rai did not publish a full-fledged autobiography, Fakir Mohan's *Atmajivana Charita* is considered as the first Odia

autobiography. Fakir Mohan must have found it difficult to write his autobiography as there was no precedence before him. In fact, in the preface to his autobiography, Fakir Mohan mentions that he does not know how to write an autobiography. He attempts to write his autobiography because many of his friends requested him to write one. He hopes that after him, more and more people will write their autobiographies in Odia. To quote Fakir Mohan's preface,

For the last four or five years, several friends and educated young men, for whom I entertain a paternal feeling, have been pressing me to write my life story. I do not find it easy to ignore their pleas, for the Oriya language is remarkably lacking in biographies; though, unfortunately, my own life is equally remarkably lacking in the kind of weighty matter that merits a biography. Furthermore, I am remarkably lacking in the seductive art of so setting down my tale as to fire prospective readers with any enthusiasm to pursue it. In fact, for the temerity, with which I embark upon this present enterprise, I have only one excuse to offer: I am firmly convinced that the not-too-distant future will find this sacred soil of ours teeming with autobiographers. All I want to do is to provide a path for them. (Senapati i)

True to Fakir Mohan's belief today there are a considerable numbers of Odia autobiographies available in the market. After Fakir Mohan's *Atmajivana Charita* some of the outstanding Odia autobiographies which need to be mentioned here are: Gobinda Chandra Mishra's *Jatiya Jibanara Atmabikasha* (1940), Harekrushna Mahatab's *Sadhanara Pathe* (1949), Baishnaba Pani's *Pani Kabinka Atmakahani* (1955), Godabarisha Mishra's *Ardhashatabdira Odisha O Tahinre Mo Sthana* (1958), Nilakantha Das's *Atmakatha* (1963), Adhiraj Mohan Senapati's *Drushtipata* (1965), Ramakrushna Nanda's *Jibana Taranga* (1969), Surendra Dwibedi's *Agasta Biplaba* (1972), and Kalicharan Patnaik's *Kumbhara Chaka* (1975), Sita Devi Khadanga's *Mora Jiban Smruti* (1978), Ramadevi Choudhuri's *Jibana Pathe* (1984), Gopinath Mohanty's *Srotaswati* (1992), Manmohan Chaudhury's *Kasturi Mruga Sama* (1995), Annapurna Maharana's *Amrutara Anubhav* (2005), Nishakar Das's *Kharasuanru Kulabiri* (2006), Basant Kumar Satpathy's *Manepade* (2008), Pratibha Ray's *Padmapatrare Jeebana* (2014), and Sourindra Barik's *Bata Chalu Chalu* (2018) among others.

If the list of autobiographies given above is any indication, only a few Odia women have written their autobiographies as compared to their male counterparts. There is only one Dalit autobiography so far. The reason, of course, is not so difficult to understand. Education for lower castes, Dalits and women was restricted before India's independence. Because of caste discrimination and patriarchal traditions, Odia women and Dalits were not privileged to write their autobiographies earlier. Therefore the autobiographies written by Ramadevi and Nishakar are pretty significant. Let us look into their autobiographies.

### Ramadevi Choudhuri's *Into the Sun*

Among several modern women's autobiographies, Ramadevi Choudhuri's *Into the Sun: An Autobiography* stands unique. Not because *Into the Sun* is out and out a personalised feminist text where the author makes her anguished private self visible to the public but because of exactly the opposite reason. *Into the Sun* as an autobiography diametrically stands opposite to many Indian women's autobiographies such as Rassundari Devi's two parts autobiography *Amar Jivan* (Bengali, 1868 and 1897), Ramabai Ranade's *Amchya Ayushtil Kahi Athavani* (Marathi, 1910), Binodini Dasi's two parts autobiography i.e. *Amar Katha* (Bengali, 1912) and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (Bengali, 1924-25), and Lakshmibai Tilak's *Smriti Chitre* (Marathi, 1934-37), to mention a few. The reasons for this may be several. Firstly, the family background of Ramadevi was such that getting an education was never a problem for her as it was in the cases of all the early women. Secondly, Ramadevi came to the scene when the reform movement in India had reached its zenith coupled with the freedom struggle led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Brought up in a Brahmo family,

Ramadevi did not encounter traditional orthodoxy. Thus Ramadevi lived in an advantageous world compared to her predecessors, for whom living in an orthodox family was a big problem for them. Ramadevi's entire family actively participated in India's freedom struggle organising mass political movements in the backward state of Orissa. After India's independence, the Choudhuri family once again took up the responsibility of restructuring the state led by Nabakrushna Choudhuri, Ramadevi's brother-in-law. Being influenced by Gandhi and later Vinoba, both Ramadevi and her husband Gopabandhu Choudhuri devoted their entire life doing rural reconstruction works in Odisha and outside, the details of which have been analysed later. But at this point, what is essential about Ramadevi's *Into the Sun* is that as a woman's autobiography, it departs from several other women's autobiographies by situating a 'self' that is more public than private political than personal, and more stable than unstable. Y.P. Anand, in his Foreword to the English translation of Ramadevi's autobiography writes that her narrative flows like a clear, deep stream, unselfconscious and self-effacing and yet absorbing. Anand compares this autobiography with that of Gandhi's *My Experiment with Truth* and states that it can be read as social history of Odisha.

Ramadevi, at the beginning of her autobiography, explains the purpose of writing her autobiography. Her explanation echoes that of Gandhi's idea of writing an autobiography. It may be recollected that Gandhi started writing his autobiography so that he would be able to narrate his experiments with truth which could be emulated by his followers. In Ramadevi's case, it was Sarala Devi, a freedom fighter and well-known woman writer of Odisha, who urged Ramadevi to write down the story of her life so that others could derive valuable lessons from it. Ramadevi agreed to the proposal when she was herself convinced that her autobiography would probably give the right directions to young women of the next generation. Of course, Ramadevi had no pretension to write her autobiography like the other great men and women of public importance. She was humble in her approach to state the reader that her life was as insignificant as that of any ordinary person,

What should I write? ... I spent the first fifteen years of my life with my parents, like any other girl. When I got married and came to live with my husband and his parents I had to busy myself looking after the household and bringing up the children that I bore. Of course, it may be of interest and of some use to young women of my kind, that is, those who have only a little education, to know how I regulated my life during this later period and quietly prepared myself for public life in the midst of my domestic chores. They may see from my life that one can serve one's country and society by cultivating one's inner qualities even if one does not have any formal education. But then, how many care to read the lives of even great men and who would care for the story of an insignificant person like me? (1)

Ramadevi, in the first few chapters, writes on the traditional autobiographical topics such as, childhood days, healthy influences from family members, marriage, parents-in-law, homemaking, births, deaths and marriages in the family, etc. These topics are of personal nature. What follows after these topics is illustration of various public events from which Ramadevi emerged as a public persona. The topics include the non-cooperation movement, Gandhi and the Congress, the Salt Satyagraha, civil disobedience movement, the Harijan movement, Gandhi's walking tour, basic education in Odisha, Khadi work, the gramdan movement, a student's strike in Odisha and famine in Kalahandi district, etc. These are the events which she describes in great detail giving particular dates, places and names of the persons involved with in the programmes. Going through these events, the reader is reminded of the similar trend, though in different settings found in the autobiographies of Surendranath Banerjee, M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, where the nation and national events get priority over the personal life of the autobiographer. This unique trend in autobiographical writing evokes several questions in our minds. For instance, can

autobiography be read as a historical text? To what extent can an autobiography be considered social history? How far is the blending of national history with personal life history permissible in an autobiography? How do women autobiographers treat Indian history as compared to men autobiographers? These and several other questions involving history, gender, nation and narration can be addressed while analysing Ramadevi's autobiography in the following pages.

Ramadevi tells us that at the wake of India's freedom her patriotic feelings went back to her childhood days. We have earlier mentioned the patriotic family Ramadevi hailed from. Ramadevi's paternal uncle, Madhusudan Das was considered to be the father of Odia nationalism, who along with Fakirmohan Senapati and Radhanath Ray played vital role in achieving statehood for Odisha in 1936. Madhusudan also emerged as a national leader representing Odisha as early as 1920s. His direct political activism must have influenced little Ramadevi. She narrates an incident of her childhood concerning her uncle. The aftermath of non-cooperation movement in 1920 brought the Montague Chelmsford reform under which national governments were formed in different parts of India. Madhusudan became a minister in the Government of Bihar and Odisha. When Madhusudan came to Cuttack after having become the minister he expected a tumultuous welcome from the public. But people instead wanted to burn his effigy in protest against his acceptance of ministership at the wake of non-cooperation movement. Interestingly Ramadevi's own cousins, brothers-in-law and nephews were among those who took that decision. Ramadevi herself though opposed his uncle accepting ministership she never appreciated the idea of anybody's effigy being burnt stating that such an event might grow into an undesirable practice.

Incidentally Ramadevi started her public work in 1921 when Gandhi had taken leadership of the freedom struggle by giving a call of non-cooperation movement. After the speech Gandhi made in 1921 in Cuttack to draw public support, he became a 'pole star' for Ramadevi. She joined the movement. By 1930 she led the Salt Satyagraha in Odisha and courted arrest for the first time. Her participation in the Satyagraha brought a symbolic message for other women who left their domestic confinements to act publicly. The following passage is an example of how women jointly made a powerful force to act creatively during the Salt Satyagraha,

At midday we took rest at the Inchuri Satyagraha camp and went to the Shrijang village that was nearby in the afternoon. We went from door to door in that village and told the women that a number of us women were going to break the salt law that day and appealed to them to join us. The women of the village responded. About fifteen hundred women came out and went with as [us] to collect salt impregnated mud from the sea shore from which salt was to be extracted by a simple indigenous process. All of us gathered some of the mud but the police were nowhere to be seen. We were told that the police have been instructed not to interfere with whatever the women did. This indifference of the police irked us. We gave a talk to the women of Shrijang about the larger aspects of the movement and returned to Balasore in the evening. (116)

Ramadevi organised women from various parts of the state to supplement a strong contingent of women for the national movement. When she got arrested for breaking the salt law, she had already become a cult figure among people. This she realised when a sea of people gathered outside the collectorate on the trial day to extend their support and respect for her by singing patriotic songs and slogans. This public act rekindled her enthusiasm, and she became doubly determined to continue her long struggle. She actively took part in various phases of the freedom movement, including the civil disobedience movement, Gandhi's Harijan movement and accompanied Gandhi in his walking tour in Odisha in 1934. Being an active participant in the freedom struggle, she was dismayed at



the aftermath of our independence. Like any other freedom fighter, she regretted that India as a nation-state had miserably failed to bring up a civil society for all her citizens to live a life of dignity and self-respect. She observes,

Freedom came in 1947. A new constitution was adopted for the country. All Indians were assured of their fundamental rights. But let us ask our consciences if untouchability has been banished from the land. Does the faith that the Diving Spirit [Divine Spirit] resides in every human being guide us? Do we give every individual the respect that is due to all human beings? We will have to pay the price for our failure to achieve even this modicum of humanness even after having become the citizens of a free country. (150)

After realising that the newly independent state hardly had any regard for the poor and the deprived, Ramadevi and her husband Gopabandhu Choudhuri and a team of co-workers comprising of Annapurna Das, Rambhadevi, daughter-in-law Sumitra and daughter Annapurna started village reconstruction work at Bari and in other parts of Odisha. They undertook village reconstruction works in the Gandhian model launched at Seva Gram by Gandhi himself. The projects included small agricultural works, weaving, cow keeping, beekeeping, gardening, and organising various training for men and women for their self-employment. In 1951 Ramadevi and Gopabandhu undertook a walking tour throughout the state, spending eight long months with the people. During this tour, they preached the message of Bhoodan, collected land gifts from the wealthy farmers and gave them to the poor and landless. During the tour, they realised that there were no facilities available for the pre-school children in rural areas. With the active support of the Utkal Sarvodaya Mandal many nursery schools, known as Shishu Vihars, were set up in many parts of Odisha. In 1962 after China's aggression most of the North-East provinces, such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram witnessed violence, and the Indian army faced heavy casualties. Ramadevi volunteered to be a part of the Shanti Sainiks, peacekeepers, to help the Indian army by providing food and medical care. During this service, she moved from Assam to Bomdila and Dirang to Cachhar to Mizoram. In 1964 she once again joined the Sarvodaya Movement, on a call given by Vinoba Bhawe. This time she went to the Gramdan areas of Koraput district of Odisha and organised the triple programme for social reconstruction, such as Gramdan, Khadi and Shanti Sena. In 1964 Odisha witnessed a terrible communal conflict in Rourkela between the refugees of the then East Pakistan and the local people. Peace finally prevailed by the active intervention of Ramadevi and her group, of course, with the help of the local administration and state government. Ramadevi also organised relief work for the victims of the great famine of Kalahandi in 1966 and the powerful cyclone that hit the coastal areas of Puri, Cuttack and Balasore in 1967. There were also many other reconstruction programmes where Ramadevi was actively involved.

Though Ramadevi continued to do social work till 1984 when she breathed her last, her autobiographical narrative came to an end in 1975, the year of national Emergency was declared by Indira Gandhi. The Emergency, as everybody knows, was a black spot in the history of India as a nation-state. The ghost of the Emergency still haunts many even today when people recall that fateful summer day of 26<sup>th</sup> June 1975 when every right of the individual was snatched away. For people like Ramadevi the Emergency was a horrible event. During this period most of her companions went underground and a few of them who organised protest against the draconian rule which the Emergency brought, got arrested, including Ramadevi's only son Manmohan Choudhuri (who is also the translator of her autobiography into English) and her brother-in-law and former chief minister of Orissa Nabakrushna Choudhuri. Though for some unknown reason Ramadevi was spared from being arrested, she was perturbed to witness cruelty all over. Those twenty months of Emergency brought trials and tribulations to many innocent lives. The resolution she



took during the period seemed to be quite significant, for it challenged the hegemony of the state power vis-à-vis the people. Ramadevi thus reflects,

But it has become impossible for me to forget the fearful events of those twenty months. I am always thinking of the advice Gandhiji had given, that persons with a national consciousness should always remain by the side of the people and help to keep the latter alert. The people should voluntarily give up untouchability, caste feelings, the dowry system and other weaknesses of our society. They should, in particular, resolve to put an end to the use of 'black money' for winning elections. Otherwise, how should they be able to get out of this vicious circle of corruption, immortality, misrule and so on? Thousands of patriotic men and women should come forward to carry the message of Total Revolution to the people and establish a Government free from corruption. To this end of saving the nation, they would have to give up their secure and comfortable ways of life. Only then will the nation be able to overcome the dangers that face it. It was not for nothing that Gopabandhu Das had sung, "Let my body fall on the soil of this land and let my countrymen walk over it". And neither was it without reason that Gandhiji had given the call for seven hundred thousand ever-vigilant sentinels in seven hundred thousand villages for awakening the people. (257-258)

At the end, what must be said about Ramadevi's *Into the Sun*? Does it echo in the line of Gandhian perception of 'self' which is more spiritual than the real? What is its socio-historical conjuncture? Ramadevi's autobiography displays a genuine concern for the needy and deprived, primarily rural women. As a result, her activities do not come as 'experiments' as they happened in Gandhi's case; they seem rooted in the ground reality. Thus, Ramadevi's long descriptions about her involvement in various socio-political and economic activities are not just a balance sheet to tell the world about her achievements. It is a bold document recording the life of an Indian woman in transition, making it clear how women who once were not allowed to live with dignity in their own homes can now make history by crossing the threshold.

### Nishakar Das's *Kharasuan to Kulabiri*

As mentioned earlier, Nishakar Das's *Kharasuan to Kulabiri* is the first Odia Dalit autobiography. It is a short autobiographical account of the author as a Gandhian social worker. Having been influenced by the Gandhian ideology, Nishakar joined the Bhoodan movement and got involved in the welfare programmes of Dalits and Adivasis in the Koraput regions of Odisha. Nishakar, in his autobiography, recollects the various events of his life, which suggest that being a Dalit it is not so easy to work in public because he has to face caste humiliations almost daily. In his autobiography Nishakar even writes that once he was beaten so severely that he was about to die. Nishakar writes all these not to gain any sympathy from his readers but to put the record straight that in a caste-infested society like India what is most dangerous is the caste prejudices. But Nishakar as a Sarvodaya activist, is determined to continue his works even at the cost of his life. At the end of his autobiography, he writes,

Gopabandhu Chaudhury, Ramadevi, Manmohan bhai, Chuni apa, Sarat Guruji, Malati Chaudhury, Nabakrushna Chaudhury have made me what I am today. Most of them are dead. Their love and blessings still guide me and, till the end of my life, I shall go on working for the sarvodaya movement and for establishing gram swaraj. This is the goal I have set myself. I have recounted some of the important events of my life. In spite of all the difficulties I face, I continue the struggle. As a sarvodaya activist I have discharged my duties with sincerity from the beginning till today. (54-55)

Nishakar belongs to the Pana Vaishnava, a Dalit community of the coastal Odisha. Because they are the followers of Vaishnavism, the Pana Vaishnavas consider themselves superior

to the other Dalit communities. Nishakar's father was the community priest responsible for performing rituals during births, marriages and deaths. But the priestly job never gave a steady income. So the family members, including Nishakar's father, had to work as labourers to earn their livelihood. Nishakar's family was very poor. So it was difficult to survive. He writes,

Our life was full of hardship. Often we had to make do with a little rice, water, salt and green chillies. We had watered rice for breakfast and watered rice for lunch. We had boiled rice at night; sometimes we ate cakes made of rice. Our lot improved only when the three of us were able to earn our livelihood. (15)

Nishakar was the youngest among three brothers. When he was still a child his father passed away. So his elder brother took charge of family responsibilities. Nishakar was sent to school hoping that after his study he would get a government job and help the family. But Nishakar took seven years to complete his class three and finally became a drop-out. He joined his brothers as a labourer. Nishakar recollects that untouchability was practiced in the school even by the teachers. He recollects,

Those days, the sabarnas did not touch anyone who belonged to pana, kandara and gokha castes. We sat apart from the others at the chatsali. The abadhana, if he wished to punish us, would throw the cane at us, he would not touch us even while beating us. When the cane touched our clothes, we would take it back to the teacher and keep it away from him. I recall another significant incident. Perhaps, I was six or seven years old at the time. We had completed our studies with the abadhana and had just enrolled ourselves in the village school. On the way to our school, a young brahmin boy of our village named Dibakar Das, used to accompany us. If ever we walked close to him, he would jump over our shadows. The brahmins reasoned that, not only our persons, but our very shadows defiled them. Caste prejudices relating to untouchability were very strong at that time. (19)

Following the caste system the upper castes have hatred towards the lower castes and Dalits. Throughout his autobiography, Nishakar documents the various instances of caste atrocities perpetuated by the upper castes towards Dalits on whimsical grounds. He recollects an incident when an educated Dalit young man was beaten by a zamindar just because he was wearing a new dhoti and carrying an umbrella. Nishakar writes,

Untouchables like panas and kandas were not allowed to carry umbrellas, wear shoes or nice white dhotis while walking down village roads. They were scared of being beaten by landlords. The period of British rule and that of the rajas and zamindars can be described as an age of darkness ... There was a young man of kandara caste ... He passed his matriculation examination from Jajpur high school. He went to visit relatives, wearing a nice dhoti and carrying an umbrella. As he passed through Sundarpur village, the khandayat zamindar of Sundarpur, who was talking to his friends, noticed him. He enquired about him, and was told by those who knew him, 'He is an untouchable boy from Olai village. He has returned after passing his matriculation examination.' The zamindar called him over and said, 'You wretch, don't you know that this is the village of Sundar Ray, the zamindar? How dare you walk down our village path wearing a dhoti and carrying an umbrella?' They thrashed him, made him take off his dhoti and wear a torn one instead, broke his umbrella and sent him back home ... (20-21)

Nishakar writes that with the change of time, caste practices are also changing. But caste prejudices are still going firm and strong. As a Gandhian who believes in truthfulness, nonviolence and peace in everyday life, he wants the upper castes to shun caste prejudices and treat the lower castes and Dalits as fellow human beings. He observes,

The untouchability community has changed its habits, customs and dress since my childhood. But the intolerant, conservative attitude of the other castes in society has caused the infamous barriers dividing castes to grow stronger in villages in all fields. Last year, I went to our

village, Singhapur. I heard from children that the harijans are still not allowed to get a hair-cut at the hair-cutting shops in the bazaar. However, young men from the untouchable community and those belonging to other castes sit together and eat. But the fear ingrained within the upper castes has kept caste prejudices alive. (53-54)

Nishakar's autobiography documents the changes the Odia society witnessed over the years. Being a Gandhian, Nishakar advocates ethical and moral principles while working among the people of various castes and communities in Odisha. He devotes his life working among the rural and tribal people of Koraput, Odisha so that people can live in peace and prosperity. Nishakar's vision to restructure rural and tribal villages of Odisha through Gandhian principles is praiseworthy.

### Conclusion

The present essay is an attempt to understand caste and gender issues in Odisha as narrated by Ramadevi and Nishakar in their respective autobiographies. Being Gandhians, both of them believe in the ethical and moral values of labour and therefore they work hand in hand with the rural and tribal people of Odisha to achieve Gandhi's dream of gram swaraj. The way Ramadevi devoted her life for the welfare of the people clearly suggests that women can do wonders if they get freedom. In the case of Nishakar, being a Dalit he had to face caste humiliations daily. But his determination and dedication to his duties make him a true Gandhian. Both the autobiographies are a testimony to the fact that it is through will power that one can brave all odds and achieve new heights.

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# Addressing Identity: Ethical Virulence and ‘Becoming an Animal’ in Bhanwar Meghwanshi’s *I Could Not Be Hindu*

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I will look at Bhanwar Meghwanshi’s controversial life writing *I Could Not Be Hindu*, from the angle of projecting an ethical dialogue for Dalit consciousness. The paradigms of Dalit identity, as often debated by several scholars, are based on how they express their crisis in relation to political situations and sensitive marginalization. In Meghwanshi’s life writing, a new trope of identity crisis is provided based on systematic obfuscation from public spheres and participation such as marginalization, I argue, constitute a new ethical dimension of Dalit eloquence. However, this ethical stance is based on the Dalit subject’s internal addressing related to change her/his perspective of the ‘given identity’. I will raise three fundamental questions relating to the above issue in this paper. First, an argument of private self vs the public sphere will be outlined to examine how the Dalit self in writing is prevented from the spheres of total expression. Next to this, I will argue that the ways of humiliation make the Dalit self ‘becoming an animal’ (paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s term) by reconstituting the self’s given notions of identity and transforming that construct for resistance.

**Keywords:** Life Writing, animal, humiliation, resistance, identity

Ever since the inception of multiple selves that occupy the construction of the Self in life writing, the corpus of knowledge concerned with the understanding of the self and society has changed totally. In contemporary life writing, the intermixing of the speaking subject with the other voices has opened up new ways of handling the issues of the self and the surroundings. Caught in the intricacies of the self’s addressing the other and how others intervene in its formation, the question of life in writing has become a matter of contestation. Succinctly defended by some philosophical discourse and other discursive practices, the self in contemporary life writing poses three major questions. The first is the existence of the autonomous self in life writing. Several thinkers from the time of James Olney have debated on this autonomy as a product of socio-cultural changes. However, in recent times, specific counterclaims have also been made. The second question is the way the self is fashioned concerning the contours of its expression. Devoid of any particular aporetic stance, the self in construction in life writing is articulated sometimes dubious and defensive. The third question is related to the relationship of the self with “others”, which is a far more debatable one in the context of the postcolonial discourses connected with identity, resistance and recovery. Perhaps this question is the most important one in our time that makes us rethink the “evolved self” in life writing. The difference between the “evolved self” and “self in evolution” is at the heart of the discourse of life writing as the latter is more concerned with the reader’s idea of the self and how it is outlined in the text. In this paper, I will critically analyze Bhanwar Meghwanshi’s *I Could Not Be Hindu* to explicate the above questions in relation to the deeply riven questions of caste and its socio-cultural problematization in India.

The challenge against the genre called autobiography has long been set by life writing in various ways. In the broad spectrum of constructing/ narrating one’s life, it undergoes

tremendous changes such as the principal narrator or the self, transforming into the unsteady trope of narration, doubts centred around the self's intricate relation to highlight what it is and the paradoxical questions evoked out of minute details. The departure from the generic convention of autobiography, therefore, is primarily a step to contextualize the self's desire to narrate the "unspoken". However, how this "unspoken" is spoken in contemporary life narratives is very much related to the background of the narrator, the space/place from where they hail, the conditions of vulnerability to which the person is submitted. Irene Kacandes argues that what the readers possess is "a high tolerance for experimentation that might be construed as revealing or representing the complexity of reality" ("Experimental Life Writing", 380-81). Though this statement edges toward a sense of reality the readers are looking for, recent examinations of the genre of life writing have very well dismissed such claims by linking life narratives to biographies and bio fictions. Most of the life writings in contemporary times share some concerns with these newly developed genres, which for most of the readers, is a crucial way to enjoy the forms of writing. In Indian life narratives, recently, we have come across a series of such experiments. What matters significantly is not how such forms of investigation are practiced; but the expressions of different styles that go with them. Every life narrative, therefore, is an experiment to rewrite life in a new sense. This is where narratives get juxtaposed with imagination or with an excess of pain and vulnerability.

Bhanwar Meghwanshi's *I Could Not Be Hindu* is the life writing of a Dalit, which expresses the question of identity, political expression set against certain conditions of external interiority, the ways of understanding the fellow sufferers and above all, issues of pain and humiliation. Contrary to the detailing of personal suffering as the hallmark of the familiar Dalit life narratives, Meghwanshi translates his experience into straightforward political questions faced by the Dalits against the State. The State that obscures the Dalit lives is the fundamental pedestal of Meghwanshi's narrative. The personal set against the public forms of suffering is further accentuated by a set of crucial experiences – not at the family level, but at the level of some groups that try to build up a nation of their choice. The broader assumptions of such an orientation question the Indian state as a monolith of upper caste aspirations and desires. The silencing of the Dalits is the silencing of the nation at large, where a few try to gain benefits from the agendas of the ruling class. In this condition, the nation's postcolonial status is seriously questioned and critiqued.

Hailing from the Bhilwara district of Rajasthan, the journey of Meghwanshi, after having lured into RSS intending to create Hindu-Rashtra, is faced with a series of turbulences and internal contradictions. The distinct features of his make-up as a *karsevak* question the importance of citizenship and democratic creeds. Among the few questions that plague the construction of Nation-State here run Hindu masculinity based on *Kshatriya* (the princely and warrior caste) as the foremost one. To make sense of the multitude of Hindu texts, oral traditions and practices, orientalist had to divide them mainly into two categories – a "Fine Tradition" comprising all Vedic systems of knowledge, the schools, rituals and manners and a "Small Tradition", where we come across all kinds of castes including the untouchables as Hindus. Apart from these categories, there are other sub-sets of people in places such as Bhilwara who try to knock at the doors of justice. In many ways, such demarcations done by the orientalist act as the foundation stones of the Indian caste system, which reinvigorated later by gaining momentum from the colonial economy and other laws. The postcolonial Indian State owes a lot to such orientalist systems of thought to build up Hindu monolithic ideologies. In such a context, revisiting orientalist texts and notions give us enough examples regarding how the colonial administrations reasserted castes by elevating the "Fine Tradition" to its zenith. This involved a process of selection of particular texts, the dissemination of their contents and appropriation of all

classes of people to rely upon the disseminated knowledge. In “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Indian Historiography is Good to Think”, Gyan Prakash points out that how orientalism functioned as a “completely European enterprise” (255) fully engaging with colonial relations of power. This is an excellent point to begin a discussion on the ongoing condition of the Dalit conditions, their exclusion from several platforms and their life narratives filled with shame and humiliation. Behind the construction of the Dalit life writing, one can see a schedule of the orientalist discourse, which doubly marginalized them in post-independent India. Meghwanshi’s life narrative, therefore, offers us a passage to view the obscure past not chartered in his life and the present political condition of attempting to make the Hindu nation.

Meghwanshi’s identity in his life narrative is dubiously articulated. The text opens with his passion for chanting Lord Ram’s name for the building up of temple at Ayodhya: “Baccha baccha Ram Ka/ Janmabhoomi ke kaam ka (Every child must prove his worth/ work for the place of Ram’s birth)” (*I could Not Be Hindu* 15). This slogan slates his desire to establish the temple in the disputed site of Ayodhya. The consequent arrest and other issues he faces roots his identity despite being a Dalit with the majoritarian Hindu groups. The induction of Meghwanshi into RSS, the dominant youth movement of Bharatiya Janata Party in India, which is predominant in masculine constructions, marks the turning point of obscuring his immaculate Dalit past. Despite the concurrent doubts and sporadic anger emerging at times in his mind, the hierarchical question of the *shakha* makes him subservient to the overwhelming notions of class and nation. Pitted against a set of beliefs that obfuscates the identity of several Dalits and the doubly marginalized, the male subjectivities that emerge in the meetings of RSS and their ideology are in conformity with the masculine virility imposed by the colonial rulers. On the one hand, the dominance of the male workers in RSS subjugates women and other classes secondary in the construction of their discourse on nationalism. On the other hand, the identity concerned with the caste is heavily oppressed by the leaders of the organization, failing which their organizational impulses will have a severe setback. Meghwanshi’s understanding that the Sangh is everywhere makes him a component in the broader dimension of caste obfuscation. A dubious identity, thus constructed, ignores the vast array of sources that are available to seek and assert one’s identity in post-independent India.

One can find how RSS, as the Hindu organization, has developed the dominant masculine, and virile imagination from some of their central texts. Drawing from the Vedic times and the legends available, its ideologues have constructed the notions of the “male” superior to all genders. The equation of the Hindu with the male stands for defining a nation of power and superiority. The contested medieval and ancient times are revived by some thinkers. The *kaliyuga* (the time where we are supposedly living) is considered to be the worst time as the Hindus have lost their glory, charm and masculinity. The power to define the Hindu, in such a context, is strategically manipulated as the sub-castes and sub-classes are carefully taken out from the organization. How this masculine taboo is ascribed to the upper caste Hindu by RSS can be seen in M.S. Golwarkar’s *Bunch of Thoughts*, where he writes Hindus are “the men born in the land of Bharat” (107) and they are “sons of the soil” (208). The unity of the Hindus for Golwalker rests on the identity they carry as they have to perform the duties for the soil where they live. The male chauvinism constantly emerging in *Bunch of Thoughts*, needless to say, connotes not only the aspiration of viewing the country as male but also the idea that male is the centre of power, knowledge, domination and social status. Of course, this goes hand in hand with the concept of Hindu nationalism, as Paola Bacchetta argues: “the united Hindu nationalist men are a metaphor for the Hindu nationalist phallus: mighty, alert, invincibly powerful, and of course, erect” (“When the (Hindu Nation) Exiles its Queers”, 148). The



connotative significance of such a construction of Hindu and nationalism attached to it debunks the heterogeneous and plural adumbration of the country's ethos and culture. The contemporary life writing by the Dalit writers faces this issue as their narrative has to mediate between the overwhelming discourse that tries to view the nation as "One" by discarding the hues and cries of the multitudes and the severe identity issues that are at stake in their communities.

While the RSS tries to claim that the Hindus had their pristine glory in *satyuga*, the Dalits try to articulate their anger through different modes of propaganda. Most of the *shakhas* attempt to bring the glory back by cultivating the desire to recapture the past by obfuscating and sidelining those who do not fit for that. Dalits, Adivasis, sexually deviant communities, the doubly marginalized and a section of the subalterns are successfully marginalized from this. The sheer desire to construct the Hindu nation springs from the idea to obscure several sects, castes, sub-castes, the economically underprivileged and other weaker sections in the society as they never square with the agenda of a dominant Hindu Rashtra. The sidelined and unwanted section of people are thus considered racially inferior as the agenda further aims to create the "nation of purity". At this juncture, Dalit life writing seriously faces specific issues. Meghwanshi's description of how such notions are cultivated in the *shakhas* testify to the above statement. Meghwanshi writes: "It took the form of questions and answers, in which questions were asked like 'Who are we, whose is this country, who considers this their motherhood? The answers would be given, 'We, of pure Aryan blood, are Hindus, of Sanatana dharma, the eternal, most ancient religion, this country is ours, only we Hindus consider this our motherland, the land in which we are fulfilled through the work. This country is our sacred pilgrimage. Since ancient times our land was a bird of gold. Rivers of milk ran here, and of curd and ghee. We are the gurus of the universe" (*I*, 51). Furthermore, when the notion of purity and the flag that would stamp India as one nation, Meghwanshi writes: "My questioning mind would not be silent even on this occasion, and I couldn't help asking how a lifeless object like the flag could guide us the way a guru should" (*I*, 55). The ongoing doubts in the mind of a Dalit worker in RSS, as we see in the above descriptions, are first censored and then forced to forget. The tussle between forgetting and the compulsion to ask more is the bedrock of Meghwanshi's life narrative. In other words, what is forbidden by the majoritarian discourse is spelt out, as compulsory effusion in the life of a Dalit in RSS. This condition as we will examine, further opens up a new trajectory of the Dalit life narrative as their oppressions and humiliation take a different mode of articulating the protest.

### **Tropes of Humiliation**

How the Dalit subject is getting humiliated is a matter of much contention. Humiliation does not mean the simple marginalization from the mainstream society and culture; on the other hand, it is matter of deep internalization that wherever the Dalit is, the world around is intricately structured to subject them to utter disappointment and sadness. Looking at the complexities involved in the humiliation of the Dalit subject, Gopal Guru argues that "karma theory based on the submissive fate is inexplicable and hampers the growth of moral vision into the knowledge of humiliation (*Theorizing Humiliation*, 15)". Set against Hegelian understanding of the master and slave relationship, the karma theory implicit in the caste structure of India, Guru argues, "effectively arrests the growth of moral insights into the experience of humiliation. It leads the victims to adopt an attitude of resigned fate. The theory of karma, from the point of view of those who are reduced to servility, seeks to manipulate the servile into acknowledging their contemptuous and repulsive image as the part of a natural social arrangement." (*T*, 5). Guru's arguments bring our attention to the familial, social and national level of humiliation the Dalit subject

undergoes as a daily routine. However, Meghwanshi's life narrative offers us another crude picture of humiliation, that is, after being inducted into the *Shakha*, how he has become minuscule or otherwise, how his trajectory of thinking received the deep wounds. When the desire to become a *pracharak* was expressed to an ascetic, the taboo that he is from the "marginalized community" (I, 64) articulated by the ascetic, deeply hurts Meghwanshi. A fractured notion of identity emerges here when Meghwanshi writes: "I was devastated by his reply. I felt intense pain at having been born in a lower caste community. But how was this my fault? What a predicament for me - here I was, ready to sacrifice my life for the sacred work of the Sangh, but my caste over which I had no control was proving an obstacle" (I, 65). When caste becomes the marker of humiliation, it compels the subject to rearticulate the desire to be with the open public, though social constraints obstruct the person to do so. Meghwanshi's leaving the Ambedkar hostel was an attempt to redefine himself. When he writes, "My idols in those days were not Ambedkar, Phule, Kabir, Buddha. I hadn't even heard of them. I knew only Savarkar, Moonje, Tilak, Gokhale, Hedgewar and Guru-ji Golwalkar" (I, 70), we find the unconscious desire of the Dalit subject to identify with the upper caste ethos of RSS.

On what basis can one study such an unconscious subservience of the Dalit subject to the upper class ethos and claims? Was the subject in the life writing stooping before a series of perturbations here? The plaguing questions give us another side of humiliation. Theorizing humiliation of the Dalit subject, one finds it appropriate to place the subject contrary to one's own making up of realizing one's identity. Since humiliation is inextricably connected to one's identity, it is essential to know how layers of identity imposed by different castes structure one's feelings and aspirations. Meghwanshi tries to redeem his self-worth by participating in all rituals and programs of RSS. While it is a temporal question of existence that the Dalit subject suffers the humiliation internally by succumbing to the majoritarian discourse of the upper caste Hindutwa ideology, the internal tensions of the subject never extinguishes the levels of humiliation despite its trends of subservience. The strange dialectic between the self and the community emerges here. On the one hand, Meghwanshi's stepping into RSS shackles his community beliefs that a Dalit will find his own ways to overcome the upper caste oppression; and on the other hand, the recognition of the Dalit inside the overwhelming majority of Hindus from the upper caste that constitutes the virile body of RSS never provides him the status of being "equal" with them or one among them. In both contexts, Meghwanshi being a Dalit, is rejected. The narrow binary construct between the self and the community is predicated here on the level of recognition. However, the subject of humiliation - the subject in life writing, is breached against a set of internal contradictions. As his Dalit community has never ostracized him, he finds it a solace to return to them, though he has deep doubts about that. At the same time, to be with the upper caste people who wield power in the organization, a daunting Dalit subject fails miserably correct their fallacies and to propel the winds of change. This is the most pervasive moment in the text. In other words, this condition is more internally doubly humiliating for a subject in life narration, who is already "doubly marginalized". Such moments in the text, where Meghwanshi desires to narrate multiple subject positions, but fails in doing so, create complexities regarding analyzing the motif of the life writing with resistance and reflection.

The social stratification that galvanizes humiliation can be seen clearly in different contexts of Dalit labour. In some sense, Meghwanshi's initial blind adherence to the Sangh Parivar reflects the notion of Dalit labour required for building up a nation. V.Geetha observes that "Born to labour, Dalits cannot claim the rights of knowing; and being denied that right they cannot know of or escape their condition of being labourers. Brahmins on the other hand, are the natural custodians of learning, but the knowledge

they produces is like a fetish, a mysterious thing which escapes – and transmutes the labour, which is instrumental in creating the conditions of knowledge in the first place” (“Bereft of Being: The Humiliation of Untouchability”, 98). In the *modus operandi* of RSS also, we find the labour rendered by Dalits acting as the fulcrum in building up the organization. The sheer negligence of their labour produce intense conflicts in their minds and many of them feel outside the system in crucial times. This negligence is further complicated when their labour gets no recognition. The organization builds up the power centres by accumulating the strength and energy of several people from the lower strata of the Hindu society. In due time, all those who helped to bring forms of agitation, protests and violence will be forgotten. Meghwanshi’s experience with the *karsevaks* during the Babri Masjid demolition is the best example of the above. In other words, the dimensions of untouchability perceived by Ambedkar can be seen at work here. Though in post-independent India, untouchability is not officially practised, its repercussions can be seen in the lack of recognition of the labour of Dalits. Extending Ambedkar’s and V. Geetha’s arguments, one can clearly point out that the public humiliation of Dalits leave them back to their once upon time practiced untouchability. The invisible untouchability, which still exists everywhere in India, is the most dangerous trope of humiliation.

The exclusion of religions other than Hinduism and castes that are considered to be oppressive and ignorant mark the notion of virile Hindu. Hindu nationalists reinscribe virile masculinity in several ways: by propagating their ideas concerned with purity, exercises in the *shakhas*, the parallel army they create by making certain sections of the organization powerful and by pamphleteering and propaganda. The idea of “purity” imparted only to Hindus and Hindu culture is propagated through songs, broadcast through programmes and funded by agencies to collect the middle class and upper class people in temples. As the RSS literature has hardly anything to talk about various other movements, the lower class uprisings and subaltern eloquence; their attempt to homogenize the virile Hindus, who are capable of changing the course of the nation – both politically and structurally, is considered to be the greatest feat. Golwalker’s description of territorial nationalism may help us to realize the notion of “Hindu purity” in relation to the crucial identity questions of Dalits and other marginalized sections in India. Golwalker writes: “It is like attempting to create a novel animal by joining the head of a monkey and the legs of a bullock to the main body of the elephant! It can only result in a hideous corpse.... If at all some activity is seen in that body, it can only result in a hideous corpse” (*BT*, 197–98). Such an idea stresses the agenda that the nation with fixed ideology and group can survive. To have such a nation, one should ward off elements of oppression and destruction. Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, sexually deviant categories and all doubly marginalized classes and castes are an anomaly to the set agenda. Such an understanding in the post-Mandal times of India opens up a set of other discourses connected to life writing. The most important of them is the question of compatibility – that is, how does an educated Dalit or someone driven by Ambedkarite ideas restructure their identity. In such a situation, life narratives vehemently articulate the desire for resistance. Shame and humiliation, undergone by Dalits, transform here to create a distinct identity.

### **Becoming Animal**

In the conventional sense of life writing, the self in narration translates experiences and transforms them to the reader’s understanding. In this process, the self in life writing sets up the agenda to invite the “other” to partake in their experiences. The empirical experiences the self-narrates, however deviant and different, can never be appropriated by the intended “other”, the readers of the life writing. Since narrating the self is a highly complex and largely unexplored process, and particularly in Dalit life narratives, it is easily confused

with rejection, humiliation and discrimination, it is crucial to understand at what levels the rejected self appears inhuman. One loses the notion of “human”, when one is intermittently subsumed to the level of the animal. The very idea that an undignified human being is worse than an animal which undergoes bad treatment, makes the narrating subject even worse in the act of narration. The famous Aristotelian distinction of man as the thinking animal emphasizes the fact we humans are animals, but what distinguishes us from the other animals, is our sense of perception and understanding. But the human becomes the animal once we shed the coat of dignity and self-respect. Meghwanshi’s text conceptualizes this idea more effectively and succinctly, perhaps more crucial than other Dalit life narratives.

Looking at how the human turns out to be the animal and how such a condition is internalized by the victim, Giorgio Agamben writes: “by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human [...]. That is, the animal separated within the human body itself. If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form” (*Open*, 37). Agamben’s postulations find extremely noteworthy when we look at the life of the aspiring Dalit thwarted by upper castes in various organizations. Meghwanshi writes about the rejection of food by the upper caste members in the *shakha*, when a Dalit delivers the same to them. When Meghwanshi realizes that upper caste members in RSS will not eat food served at his own home, that moment of realization that he is a lower caste Dalit pain him more than anything: “I felt defeated in my own home. But I didn’t know by whom. My father had won, but it was the Sangh that had struck the blow. What would I tell father if he asked why they wouldn’t eat in our house?” (*I*, 83). Later, when Meghwanshi finds out how the food given from the family of a Dalit is splattered all over the road by the upper class in RSS, his humiliation combined with his identity deepens. The thrown away food by human is usually consumed by animals and birds. The street dogs, crows and parrots are all the takers of such leftovers and discarded things. The food of the Dalit, unconsumed and disrespected by others, in this context equates to the animal status; in other words, to the leftover food given to animals. This experience, where the lack of love and respect toward food served by a Dalit, marks the moment of equating his life with the animal. The life of a Dalit reveals at great length how a human being’s presumably independent and autonomous self continually discovers itself to be constituted in and through external differences and arrays of cultural power exerted by the upper castes. Such an understanding stutters his belief in others, particularly in those fellow Sanghis with whom Meghwanshi was working. However, this realization, more than humiliation and shame attached to it, reduces him irretrievably to the level of an animal life—savage, uncouth and uncivilized.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari observe that “a becoming-animal involves a pack, a band, a population, peopling, in short, a multiplicity” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 260) and that “we do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity” (*T*, 264). Extending the above argument, one can further point out that Meghwanshi’s gory realization at the Sangh that he is a Dalit, where the sense of double marginalization and resonances of untouchability are attached, claims for the need of a separate organization, that is, the need to get organized as a different mode of atomic expression. As Deleuze and Guattari have pointed out, the “becoming-animal” results from the encounter with the other, aspire a reshaping, a reorganizing of their potentialities. Such a recognition is a mode of resistance. Meghwanshi’s text encounters an interesting paradox here, while it is

doubtful that Dalits can articulate their desire to counter the majoritarian views about them by the upper class in RSS, they also assemble to claim their animal existence by strategic interventions and resistance posed against the hegemonic and monolithic Sangh ideology and practice. This inherent paradox is a platform, where the Dalit subject in life narrating is breaching against the public, where the readers both as the other and participants in the Dalit eloquence shudder at the thought of creation of a new public domain. The construction of such a Dalit self in life writing is, as Deleuze and Guattari state indicate; the notion that “becomings are minoritarian; all becoming is essentially becoming-minoritarian” (T, 320). The rejection of Dalits from the public platforms and the consequent denial of their identity – as reflected in the text, by showing disrespect to food, clothes and even accompanying them, make their “becoming-animal” state more vibrant for resistance. In other words, shame and humiliation make them more minoritarian. Deleuze and Guattari contend that “man is majoritarian par excellence” (320). The majoritarian and dominant caste operate the notion of purity of the nation, space and place by eradicating the impure, vulgar, and lower caste. Seen in this context, the expression of “becoming an animal” in Meghwanshi’s text is loaded with many potential possibilities. By attaining the status of “becoming an animal”, paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas, one can say that Meghwanshi leaves the “pack” of the majoritarian discourse of the nation construction. The realization that he is a part of “becoming a minoritarian” makes him think of a separate space and place in life writing. A minoritarian, thus constituted, threatens the status of a homogenized concept of the Nation-State.

As the life narrative of Meghwanshi further unfolds, we find the inherent tension of this “becoming animal” status contradicting how the narrative is outlined. However, this is a narrative tension – the one that encompasses some kind of narrative justifiability as the text wants to make things understand in its way. Contradicting the textual desire of making things understand, we find deep-seated anxiety of anger thrust against the majoritarian discourse of the nation. One such challenge in the text is when Meghwanshi doubts the tale of Ramdev Pir, a sage appropriated by RSS. The doubt is centred on the methodology of the perpetuation of the story. The Dalit saint Pir was appropriated by the Sangh to denigrate him further relating to free sex. The declaration that he is “Kanchaliapanthi” and the sexual innuendos attached to certain practices create the awareness that the Dalit seer, whoever they are, can never bring equality in society. The constructed tale of Ramdev Pir, Meghwanshi contends, opposes his familiar version of folk tradition. By challenging the epistemology of the Hindu majoritarianism, Meghwanshi tries to resist the belief systems woven around Dalit seers, thinkers and workers. Exposing the term “Kanchaliapanthi”, Meghwanshi observes that “This derogatory term comes from the calumny that the followers of this sect practices sex as worship. It is believed that its members, husbands, and wives, went for worship after 11 pm, where, after bhajans and puja, the women’s bodices were placed in a pot (kanchali is the word in Rajasthani for bodice or breastcloth). The men were blindfolded, and whichever women’s bodice they picked from the pot, they had sex with her. Semen is the Prasad and this sexual intercourse was believed by the sect to be sacred and to bring about moksha, or liberation from the cycle of reincarnation’ (I, 141–42). Such types of sexual promiscuities, Meghwanshi observes, are against the rationale of women liberation and equality of women, the contemporary Dalit societies aim for. By challenging the created assumptions around a particular Dalit saint by the majoritarian Hindu sects, the text engages in a single action – that is, creation of a rationale where Dalits will come together and form a pack, which would produce a deterritorialization or a movement from majoritarian to minoritarian that is irreversible. As far as Dalits are surrounded by such created epistemologies of majoritarian discourse, however much they try, their liberation seems to be a distant dream. In other words, Meghwanshi’s



life narrative opens up a trajectory that contradicts the claims of “constructed Dalit lives”. This epistemological break, vibrant and virile, produces fissures in the Hindu belief systems. The text, therefore, offers a tension of the bestial existence of a Dalit—constructed by the upper-class echelons and internalized by the desire to form a member in the pack of herds that constitute the minority status.

### Theorizing Lived Experience

Meghwanshi’s text takes us to a central debate pertinent in our time: Can we conceptualize life narratives only because they are “lived experiences”. The question of fiction, deeply lurking within the life narratives, has for some time equated these narratives with fiction. As the distinction between life and fiction is fragile and relative, a whole range of doubts centred on the life narratives is in circulation in contemporary times. As far as the Dalit life narratives are concerned, theorists and scholars are of the uniform opinion that significantly few fictional elements are empanelled in such narratives. How does one solve the tension between fiction and reality in life narratives is a question worth pondering. However, one central feature in Dalit life narratives is the thrust on “lived experience” more than constructed and imaginary experiences, which veer toward fiction. At the same time, the “lived experience” of the Dalits is also widely contested. Pain and suffering at various points of time constitute an essential feature on the ongoing struggles of Dalits against all systems of oppression.

In the debate between Gopal Guru and Sunder Sarukkai, we have some glimpses of such ideas. Elaborating the theoretical premises of Gopal Guru and M. N. Sreenivas, Sunder Sarukkai analyzes the “lived experience” and its influence in life writing. Sarukkai first gives a reply to Sreenivas’s idea of autobiography by saying, “fiction based on lived experiences could actually be seen as a legitimate mode of theorizing” (*Cracked Mirror*, 37). Furthermore, Sarukkai finds problems with the publicly acclaimed “lived experience” outlined by Guru as the kernel of life writing. Life writing, in any conditions, colludes with certain forms of fiction, and thus, it achieves the status of empirical cum imaginary attestation of the self. In the debate with Guru, Sarukkai also asks the question: “What is the nature of authorship between an individual and the theory she constructs?.... A person who experiences is not an author of that experience like a person who theorizes about that experience” (C, 38). Implicit in the question of Sarukkai lies the difficulty to claim that “lived experience” should be the judgment of Dalit life narratives. Such a philosophical stance problematizes specific theoretical grounds of Dalit writing. More than in any other form of writing, Dalit writing, especially Dalit life writing is regarded as authentic due to the “lived experience” of the subject. Such excruciating experiences can never be spotted in other life writings as the subjects in such narratives do not have accurate experience of shame, humiliation, torture and pain. The question of “lived experience” contradicts elements of fantasy or other forms of cognitive imperatives. At the same time, one never can be certain that all “lived experiences” are valid to our understanding. The tussle between the empirically encountered “lived experiences” of Dalits and the methodology of internalizing them by the readers constitute another paradox. This paradox is where one finds the authorship of Dalit life narratives. Taking a cue from Sarukkai’s idea that “we own our experience but not author them” (C, 38) is what makes Dalit “lived experience”, a matter of contestation.

We find the pattern of “lived experience” of Meghwanshi approximating the authorship when he starts writing articles criticizing the Sangh. The outbursts of anger explicit in his writings are the products of his troubled “lived experiences” and they, without any pretension, challenge the hegemony of RSS. We find the subject of life writing here establishing a definite identity after he was oscillating between the majoritarian belief



systems and caste-based obfuscations within his caste. As experience is empirically articulated, the "lived experience" has in it the pathos of one's deep questions of an inward search. It is shame and humiliation that make Dalits search their identity and origins. Such a realization springs in Meghwanshi's mind when he says "... Personally I think it is a waste of energy to fight for Dalit entry into any place of worship. The thirty-three crore gods and goddesses of Santana Hindu dharma have not done a thing for Dalits. Not a single deity's heart melted at our pathetic situation; not one said to his devotees, include these Dalits too, after all, they worship me as well" (*I*, 210). Such moments of realization mark the "lived experience" something more intricate and compelling in the life writing. Such moments of recognition mark the crucial moment of "others" to come forward to understand the life of a Dalit. Yet another instance is when Meghwanshi asserts, "No Dalit fears a bomb-hurling Taliban terrorist as much they fear the terror of Savarna Hindus" (*I*, 179). Invoking the tale of Sambhuka and Ekalavya from the epics, Meghwanshi translates his experience to the contemporary situation of Dalits, where they are forced to eat cow dung.

Theorizing "lived experience" also makes us aware of the sensory experiences – sometimes overtly hidden due to internalized shame and some other times publicly shown visibly. Aniket Jaaware categorically states: "The one substance that cannot ever be contaminated is, paradoxically, the dalit body. Being the agent of contamination, it cannot itself be contaminated by something else. It does not have the power to be contaminated. In contrast, with increasing gradations, the non-dalit bodies have the power to be contaminated and thus must fear the contact with the dalit bodies" (*Theorizing Caste*, 99). By illustrating the cause of fear generated in the minds of the non-Dalits, Jaaware tries to offer a discourse of the Dalit body based on sensory perceptions. Touch, smell, sight and even shadow in Jaaware's analysis, turn out to be the basic codes of segregation. The inviolable codes of chastity, hence, face threats and dangers as Dalits are at the root of all empirical and civilizational existence of humanity. Meghwanshi's life narrative asserts Jaaware's theorization of touching and non-touching as it dismantles the question of "I" from the romanticized and social notions prevalent in other life narratives. The "lived experience", as the text tries to indicate, is the complex mechanism of the lives of several Dalits, those who struggle hard every day in public domain for getting justice and equal rights.

## Conclusion

Meghwanshi's text, as I have argued in this study, opens up a new rationale for questioning the existing questions concerned with Dalit life narratives. As most Dalit life narratives contain issues of caste oppression and resistance, the ideological sleight of hand in them is Dalit upsurge. The subject in such narratives is centred on the narrator who, in her/ his narration, attempts to articulate the paradigms of identity issues. However, in Meghwanshi's narrative, there are attempts to move beyond such constrained and pre-ordained features of Dalit lives. Such attempts are the outcome of Meghwanshi's breach with the RSS and other dominant caste issues in society. The breach with the dominant castes and the forceful becoming of the minoritarian, makes him an essential element of the "pack", organized to fight the majoritarian discourse in our time. At the same time, the subject in the life narrative, embraces several similar and dissimilar subjects, mainly from the society, to articulate the desire of freedom. The text, undoubtedly, complicates the life narrating subject and suffering subjects outside. The strange connection thus brought out between "I" in the text and others, offers the possibility to chart a different discourse of life narrative. By doing so, the text maps the Dalit resistance in the history of Indian life narratives.

The issues of humiliation, shame, differentiation and “lived experience”, I have suggested, imply the basic notations of the contemporary Dalit experience, which fight caste oppression and the establishment of One Nation. In Meghwanshi’s text, unlike in other Dalit life writings, “lived experience” encompasses specific pertinent issues of various other Dalit experiences, most of them in relation to the public sphere from where Dalits are successfully evaded. More than the spatio-temporal issues of the locales in Rajasthan, such incidents do tell us the conflicts of the Dalits by aligning themselves with the majoritarian groups. The RSS that operates with the endowed extraordinary power to subsume the interests of the lower castes in their organization, Meghwanshi’s text suggests, puts into question the diversity and plurality of the nation. Seen in this context, Meghwanshi’s text is intended to articulate a different voice of the oppressed, which would ultimately question the ethos of the nation. In other words, the relationship between the life writing and nation-making, is more a virile act, which questions and shatters the assumption of nation as a monolithic construct. Moreover, the text sharply challenges ideas such as purity, divinity and homogeneity as they are the operative mechanism of the elite upper class of the nation and as they never provide an opportunity of reflection for the lower caste people. Such attempts conflate the creation of the one supreme Nation-State against the many, where the doubly marginalized and the subalterns fail constantly to articulate their voice. Finally, Meghwanshi’s text progresses from the striated conception of a regular Dalit writing as it invites a plurality of reading and heterogeneous critique from all quarters of the society. Such a progression marks the moment of the life narrative’s engagement with knowing the “Other”, who are its readers despite their class and creed.

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# Death-Travelers, Buddhas, and Comics: The Graphic Memoir of an American *Delok*

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LUCIA GALLI

**Abstract:** To narrate a life, one needs to live one, yet the correlation between biographical writing and βίος is hardly a given one. Otherworld journeys constitute a rich literary corpus that assume a unique character in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of *delok* ('das log) literature. These texts offer a precious glimpse of complex narratological, as well as self-making, processes, especially when translated into a different cultural milieu. Taking my cue from Samuel Bercholz's *A Guided Tour of Hell* (2016), I will examine a *delok* account that is, in many ways, exceptional. Written in English by an American Buddhist and enriched by illustrations and drawings by a renowned Tibetan artist, the work is a fascinating textual and visual attempt to translate Tibetan Buddhist concepts of death and afterlife into a cultural context that is deeply "other".

**Keywords:** *delok*, otherworld journey, *A Guided Tour of Hell*, Tibetan Buddhism, graphic memoir

Human beings are narratological creatures, and nothing fascinates us more than life itself. Narratives of the self, ours and others', act as meaning-making processes whereby specific culture-bound structures are enacted and enforced. Life narratives must hence be understood as historically situated practices of self-representation, performed through distinctive discourses of memory, authority, and identity. The inescapability of such historical and cultural matrix cautions against accepting any firsthand recollection at face value, since the self-knowing of many autobiographical acts is relational, that is to say, embedded into a context that is "other". Regardless of its supposed singularity, the voice of the self is indeed a collective one, a choral convergence of real and ideal personhoods. This "thickness" is even more tangible the more we diverge from the "average" account of a life to embrace alternative narratives of self-formation in which the boundaries between this world and the other(s) are crossed and overcome. From mythemic *katábasis* to shamanic experiences, journeys to the underworld feature in nearly every culture. They are a ritualized expression of initiatory death and re-birth to be re-enacted and transmitted through public performances, dramas, and games – the passing from one state (i.e., life) to the other (i.e., death) marking a liminal condition out of which one can emerge only transformed. Return-from-death stories are a well-known field of inquiry in Western academia, and their evolution – from the emergence of the apocalyptic traditions of late antiquity to modern testimony of near-death experiences (NDEs) – has been the subject of countless studies. Scholarship on Tibetan life narratives of the otherworld is far more recent (and as such admittedly less impressive in its output), yet it can offer much in terms of comparative insights.

In the following pages, I will first introduce the genre of *delok namthar* ('das log rnam thar), literally "the liberation stories of those who came back from death," outlining its development and main features, and interpreting its narrative transitions – from orality to textuality, from narrative paintings to dramatic performances – as a pedagogical act, that allowed such literature to effectively integrate highly-sophisticated concepts

as expressed in scholastic and ritual texts into popular notions of death and afterlife. Having so set my interpretative ground, I will then examine a new, contemporary form of *delok* literature, namely *A Guided Tour of Hell* (2016), a graphic memoir written by the American Buddhist Samuel Bercholz in collaboration with the Tibetan artist Pema Namdol Thaye. In comparing this atypical *delok* narrative with traditional accounts, I will remark on the way and means through which the salvific message at the core of the genre is preserved and delivered in a context that is, culturally and historically, utterly alien to the intended one.

### **The popularity of death: The narrative power of *delok***

In her study of the otherworld journey, Carol Zaleski defines the genre as “a work of the narrative imagination”, in which “the universal laws of symbolic experience” bend to “the local and transitory statutes of a given culture” (7). As such, no journey to the underworld is the same, regardless of apparent similarities across time, culture, and place. Be they visionary experiences, shamanic trips, physical descents, or near-death experiences, all have culturally specific features, shaped by the social and historical setting in which they occur (5–6). Firsthand accounts of travels to the underworld and the heavenly realms represent an interpretative literary conundrum in many ways. The absence of a general theory of otherworld journey narration, and the tendency to level any “anomalies” in the search of a single comprehensive model, demand the scholar to be mindful of the singularities that differentiate each case and contribute to the particularity of the genre within the larger category of life writing, a task even more daunting once non-Western contexts are taken into consideration, as we shall see in the following pages.

*Delok* narratives belong to the wider, and admittedly ambiguous category of Tibetan auto/biography. Conventionally subsumed under the umbrella term *namthar* (“complete liberation”), these texts have a strong edifying character, as they mostly narrate the *vitae* of exemplary figures, whose life is construed as an ideal model to be followed.<sup>1</sup> At a first glance, the identification of otherworld journeys as *namthar* appears contradictory. *Delok* are, on balance, ordinary people, either men or women, whose only (though impressive) peculiarity lies in having died and returned to report what they have witnessed in the underworld. Yet, it is their very same ordinariness – their being deceptively “mediocre” – that sets them apart, to the point of becoming themselves “a source of religious authority and an object of popular worship” (Epstein, “On the History and Psychology of the ‘Das-log” 21). The salvific element, so pervasive in *delok* literature, closes any perceived gaps between these personal testimonies and the highest form of hagiography. The didactic aim of traditional *namthar* – to inspire a virtuous emulation in the devotee – is here pursued contrariwise. Whereas the life stories of the religious figures are meant to show the benefits of good actions, *delok* narratives, with their graphic descriptions of suffering in the hells, vividly elucidate the negative consequences of poor behavior.

Since much has been written on the history and socio-religious functions of *delok* narratives, I will hereafter provide a generic overview, referring any interested reader to the extant literature on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Despite some sporadic textual evidence reporting the existence of the phenomenon as early as the twelve century (Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld* 4), *delok* narratives emerged as distinctive literary genre only in the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a period that saw the systematization of specific liturgical programs concerning the dead and the afterlife (137). These treasure-texts,<sup>3</sup> collectively known as *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities of Karma Lingpa* (*Kar gling zhi khro*) and titled after the treasure-revealer who originally discovered them in the late fourteenth century, comprise esoteric yoga teachings centered on the *maṇḍala* of one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities as well as detailed instructions on religious practices to

be performed in the prolonged and delicate phase that starts with the physical death, continues in the postmortem limbo of *bardo* (*bar do*), and ends in rebirth. From the late fifteenth century onward, knowledge of this latter, smaller set of funerary texts, titled *Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo* (*bar do thos grol*), along with the main cycle of which it was part, gradually spread beyond Karma Lingpa (Karma Gling pa, 1326-1386)'s birthplace in south-east Tibet, following different transmission lines. With the diffusion of xylography in the eighteenth century, printed versions of the treasure tradition became easily available, but by that time, these ritual texts, originally recognized as a primary liturgical source only in certain Nyingma (rNying ma) and Kagyu (bKa' rgyud) communities, had lost any distinctive institutional identity (Cuevas, *The Hidden History* 17-20) and figured among the most commonly employed funerary practices.

The wide popularity enjoyed by the *Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo* undoubtedly contributed to the standardization of Tibetan Buddhist concepts of death and afterlife (Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld* 137) and heavily influenced, for better or worse, Western perceptions of Tibetan Buddhist eschatology since 1927, following the publication of Walter Evans-Wentz's English translation of the funerary set – the infamous *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.<sup>4</sup> The popularization of these and other, much older rituals, such as those associated with the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* (*Elimination of All Evil Rebirths*) and *Hevajra* tantras, provided the ideological foundation of traditional *delok* narratives, most of which date from the early sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries (Epstein, “On the History and Psychology of the ‘Das-log” 22). In their traditional form, these auto/biographical testimonies present a distinctive narrative pattern repeated almost unaltered in all the extant versions, regardless of the narrator's gender, social status, or origin. In her ground-breaking ethnography of modern *delok*, Françoise Pommaret divides the inner structure of the narrative into seven sequences: narrator's presentation, i.e., names of oneself and one's parents, and birthplace (1); preamble to the otherworld journey (2); awareness of death (3); first contact with (4) and description of (5) the netherworld; encounter with Yama, the Lord of Death (6); and return to the world of the living (7) (*Les Revenants de l'Au-delà* 79-80).

Out of these sequences, each representative of a narrative turn, much attention has been paid for their socio-historical content to the first and seventh ones – the *alpha* and *omega* of the tale, where its gist, construed to encompass time and space, is connected to here and now of the *delok* and their community.<sup>5</sup> The narrative format, standardized as it is, makes it almost impossible to identify the “original” *delok* account, for these life narratives constitute, as Bryan J. Cuevas aptly points out, “a conglomerate of traditions that circulated in both oral and literary form and were worked and reworked over time by the collaborative efforts of multiple contributors, including the *delok* themselves, their biographers, editors, scribes, printers, and other interested promoters” (*Travels in the Netherworld* 11). From a narratological point of view, it is such *interchangeability* of the narrator against the *unchangeability* of the message that constitutes the most important feature of *delok* literature; a quick glance at the list of extant traditional accounts will suffice to confirm the heterogeneity of the *delok* themselves vis-à-vis the set plot (Pommaret, *Les Revenants de l'Au-delà* 83-84). From the narratives, it emerges that those who return from death are not “chosen ones”: tellingly, many *delok* attribute their extraordinary experience to mistaken identity (Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld* 51). Such “randomness” enhances the paradigmatic role of the narrator as the embodiment of the average, failing human being, who unwittingly wastes the rarest of births, that in a human body. While Buddhist cosmological sources depict the denizens of the six realms of existence (i.e., hell beings, hungry spirits, animals, humans, demigods, and gods) as equally trapped in an endless cycle of death and rebirth (*samsāra*) and bound



to experience pleasure and pain in bodies that reflect karmic trajectories of their own creation, the very few whose *karma* led to a human birth may aspire to take control of the process of rebirth by engaging in merit-making practices (Powers 2021).

*Delok* narratives, centered on the law of *karma* and impermanence, testify the horrors awaiting those who do not heed the *dharma* tenets. The core instructions of the *Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo* are here delivered without sophistications: the *delok* see the signs of death on their own body and experience firsthand the agony that heralds the end of one's life, as well as the visions that accompany the entrance of the conscious principle into the narrow path of the *bardo*. In vivid detail, they recount the sufferings inflicted to the damned in the eighteen hells and the judgment that awaits the dead. Yet, theirs is, after all, a testimony of hope. As the sixteenth-century female *delok* Lingsa Chökyi (Gling sa chos skyid) reminds herself (and us) in her much-beloved tale,

All light is your own light, all rays are your own ray, all bodies are your own body, all sounds are your own sound, they are all the inner glow of your own mind.<sup>6</sup>

Like nightmares, the hells and their denizens are nothing more than mental creations that will dispel as fog in the light of awakened mind. While such awareness may be reached in this life by advanced meditators, the mere recitation of ritual texts, such as the *Liberation upon Hearing*, and prayers, like the *Diamond Cutter* (*Vajracchedikā*), is deemed beneficial in assisting and supporting the uninitiated in their journey through the *bardo*. Anonymous in life, the *delok* return from death to a new status, akin to that of a prophet. The otherworldly experience endows the narrator an authority recognized by their community first and by the religious institutions later, the same ones who coax the “returner” to set their tale to record. In line with *namthar* tradition, the composition of *delok* accounts is thus the result of explicit and reiterated requests and is often carried out by third parties under the patronage of invested sponsors.<sup>7</sup> Such a complex nexus of telling, drafting, and editing introduces a set of issues about the process of appropriating and overwriting the original oral narrative, and may go a long way to explain the standardization of *delok* literature over time. As Zaleski notes for medieval accounts of otherworld journeys, “we cannot simply peel away the literary wrapper and put our hand on an unembellished event. Even when a vision did occur, it is likely to have been re-worked many times before being recorded” (86). The latter point is particularly relevant if we consider that the transition from orality to textuality often occurred after the death of *delok* (Pommaret 2012) – the prescriptive influence of the institutional environment over the whole process undoubtedly ensured the ideological compatibility between the didactic aim of *delok* literature and the canonical principles on death and afterlife as expressed in ritual texts (Epstein, “On the History and Psychology of the ‘Das-log’” 70; Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld* 137).

The experiential authority of the *delok*, that is to say, the authority they gain in virtue of their otherworld journey and encounter with Yama, is an expression of the proactive function that experiences play in the construction of subjectivity. By dying and returning, *delok* are jolted out of synch with reality as they know it: their sense of self – that amalgam of identities created through the material, cultural, economic, and interpersonal relations – is inescapably changed, forever morphed by the experience they went through and the message they were entrusted with at the end of their judgement. The judicial assessment of deeds, executed in a divine court, is a central theme of *delok* literature, but it is by no means an exclusive feature. Here,

[a]s in many other traditions, death provides the occasion for a dramatic unmasking, in which one's true character (often represented by the triad of “thoughts, words, and deeds”) is externalized for all to see ... (Zaleski 27)



Contrary to the Christian narratives of otherworld journeys and near-death experiences to which Zaleski refers, the final judgment reported in *delok* accounts is not a solipsistic event, “an encounter with oneself” (27), rather it is a testimony to the universal exactness of the law of *karma*. The subject of scrutiny is not the narrator (although they too will be judged prior to their return), but mankind’s weakness in the face of evil, and the remedies the living could adopt to escape future suffering. Among these, pride of place is given to the recitation of the Avalokiteśvara six-syllable mantra, the ubiquitous *om maṇi padme hūṃ*.<sup>8</sup>

It has been noted elsewhere (Epstein 1982, Pommaret 1989, 1997, 2012) that most traditional *delok* narratives advocate Nyingma, Kagyu, or non-sectarian approaches in conjunction with the salvific ethics of the Avalokiteśvara cult. The worship of this bodhisattva, originated in India and Nepal in early centuries of the common era, assumed prime status in Tibet from the eleventh century onward, following the diffusion of the *Mani Kabum* (*Maṇi bka’ ’bum*), a collection of texts attributed to the seventh-century Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po) and concerned with Avalokiteśvara devotional practices (Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism* 144). The popularity of the *maṇi*-mantra as an effective, purifying charm much owed to the preaching activities of the *maṇi pa*, storytellers and professional reciters, simultaneously narrative *personae* and propagators of *delok* literature.

As warp and weft, *maṇi pa* and *delok* contribute to the narrative fabric of these stories, both in terms of composition and, as we shall see, diffusion. Bodily vessels of Avalokiteśvara’s salvific power, *maṇi pa* appear in the narrative as saviors: due to their ability to move between the realms of existence, they are believed to regularly descend to the underworld to liberate hundreds of thousands of beings and lead them to the heavens. Unlike that of the *delok*, theirs is a true *katábasis*, a journey in physical form akin to that of the Buddhist saint Maudgalyāyana.<sup>9</sup> Bearers of blessings, *maṇi pa* are therefore welcomed and respected in the world of the living, the same that they roam as venerated beggars, bringing their tales and reciting their mantra. These storytellers often rely on visual supports, such as painted cloth strolls (*thangka*), parasol-adorned *maṇi*-wheels, or *stūpa*-shaped statues, known as *tashi gomang chörten* (*bkra shis sgo mang mchod rten*), literally “the auspicious, many-doored *stūpa*”. *Delok* narratives are part of the repertoire of any *maṇi pa*. Thanks to their clear, edifying message and vivid depictions of the underworld, these stories are still popular in the Tibetan cultural sphere, where they are performed in dramas<sup>10</sup> and well as in solo recitals, the words of the storyteller brought to life by the images on a *thangka*.

Acting synergically, visual and textual narrative recreate the reality of *delok*’s experience – the images materializing the words, the words elucidating the images. Reading occurs at a double register – the details on the *thangka* do not merely illustrate the text, they complement it, adding a new layer, that of the artist, to the already complex literary nexus. The correlation of visual and textual narratives, which figures prominently in the process of popularization of *delok* literature in the Tibetan sphere, adds to the heuristic tools we may use to evaluate Samuel Bercholz’s *A Guided Tour of Hell* (2016), a work that is, in many ways, a cultural hybrid. Based on the near-death experiences of an American Buddhist practitioner and accompanied by the illustration of the Tibetan artist Pema Namdol Thaye, this work translates traditional Tibetan concepts of death and afterlife into a context where those same notions have been severely misinterpreted (or better yet, *reinterpreted*) since 1927, despite the several attempts at rectification done in the following years.<sup>11</sup> Like a modern rendering of a *maṇi pa*’s *thangka*, the comic-style drawings in *A Guided Tour of Hell* are meant to facilitate the reader’s grasping of the narrative’s message, and function as a bridge between the two cultural worlds, as we shall see in the following section.

### *A Guided Tour of Hell: An American delok?*

In the foreword to his memoir, Bercholz recalls how, after hearing of his near-death experience, Tulku Thondup Rinpoche amusedly branded him “the first American *delok*”. Whether said in jest or in earnest, the Tibetan master’s words struck a chord, and the seed of what will be later become *A Guided Tour of Hell* was planted. Planning at first to structure his testimony as a graphic novel centered on a dialogue between Dante Alighieri, Patrul Rinpoche (dPal sprul rin po che, 1808–1887),<sup>12</sup> and himself, Bercholz soon discards the format as “too conceptual”. Yet, the idea of a narrative that is both textual and visual proves to be impossible to abandon, and the longer Bercholz thinks about it, the more he is convinced that his experience can only be conveyed graphically. The following years see much collaboration between the author and Pema Namdol Thaye, a traditionally trained Tibetan artist, whose mastery won him permanent residency in the US in 2008. The synergy between narrator and artist is transformative for both. While Bercholz re-lives his otherworld experience twice, in memory first and on the pages later, Pema Namdol Thaye contemplates in his mind’s eye the hellish landscapes and encounters – his *samten bardo* (*bsam gtan bar do*), or “*bardo* of meditation”, thus acting as a perfect counterpoise to Bercholz’s *chönyi bardo* (*chos nyid bar do*), or “*bardo* after death”. A trained traditional artist, Pema Namdol Thaye is aware of the importance that correct mental disposition has in the realization of a drawing. In the same way of a *thangka*, his comic-style illustrations are thus meant to spiritually engage and educate the reader, offering them a narrative that is both textual and visual.

From a narratological point of view, Bercholz’s work is punctuated by sequences, roughly identifiable with his death(s), journey to the underworld, and return to life. The similarities between modern accounts of (Western) near-death experiences and *delok* narratives have already been discussed elsewhere (Epstein, “A Comparative View”), and it suffices here to say that, broadly speaking, *A Guided Tour of Hell* does not diverge from the generic template identified in previous scholarship on the subject. There are nevertheless substantial discrepancies in the episodic sequences, both in their order and content, that distinguish Bercholz’s memoir from either modern NDEs or traditional *delok* narratives and make of it a sort of cultural hybrid. For the sake of the present discussion, I will focus in particular on those dissimilarities that mostly differentiate the work from traditional *delok* literature.

The explicit reference to multiple near-death experiences is the first variation we encounter in the narrative. Bercholz died and returned twice, first in his youth and then in his middle age. In both cases, he reports sensations common to all “returners”: tunnel vision, intense light, and out-of-body experience (OBE). Although traditional *delok* narratives usually report a single event, ethnological studies conducted by Pommaret (1989) and, more recently, Prude (2016) have demonstrated that contemporary *delok* embark on otherworld journeys on a regular basis.<sup>13</sup> The phenomenology of these events, much resembling in their features shamanic trips, are akin to modern near-death experiences, and incidentally to Bercholz’s – their duration, for instance, rarely stretches beyond a few hours, a far cry from the week-long death purported in traditional *delok* literature.

The shifting of the narrative climax is the second variation in Bercholz’s narrative. While his passing is marked by excruciating physical and mental pain – a feature his tale shares with that of the *delok*, but that is rarely present in modern NDEs,<sup>14</sup> the absence of any references to divine judgement remarkably differentiates the memoir from traditional otherworld journeys, be they Tibetan or otherwise. The didactic function of the court, with its clear description of sins and punishments, is here fulfilled by encounters with denizens of the various hells – hot, cold, and peripheral. The evocative

text-cum-image medium reaches its apex in these phantasmagorical vignettes, which can only “point”, as the author says (viii), to the message underlying them. Like the judicial cases reported in traditional *delok* narratives, the fantastic nature of the figures populating Bercholz’s journey nods to popular imagery and should therefore be read against the specific cultural and historical contexts in which both the author and his targeted audience are embedded. The hellish snippets in Bercholz’s writing address contemporary Western, and particularly American, fears: terrorism, autocracy, solitude, obesity, environmental crisis. Boogeymen of modern age, the stereotypical – in many ways politically incorrect<sup>15</sup> – vignettes advise against adopting extreme views, be they nihilism or a dualistic perception. The function and mechanisms of the law of *karma* and impermanence, that in traditional *delok* literature are explicated through examples, are here spelt out clearly. The fundament alienness of these Buddhist concepts – so familiar to Tibetans of all ages – requires Bercholz to address any interested Western reader to the appendix, where a brief explanation of key notions (e.g., *saṃsāra*, Wheel of Life, *karma*, the six realms) is provided for guidance.

The third variation lies in the function that Bercholz’s spirit guides fulfil in the narrative. Most of traditional *delok* accounts agree in presenting the narrator escorted in their journey by a vaguely divine figure, either male or female, whose role is to blunt the *delok*’s anxiety and confusion, offering explanations and comfort whenever needed. Tibetan returners share, with few exceptions,<sup>16</sup> a dismal ignorance of formal doctrines; even those trained in sophisticated tantric practices like the “transference of consciousness”, or *phowa* (*’pho ba*), fail miserably when put to test. While the *delok* journey the hells fearing their own final damnation, Bercholz is welcomed and guided by Yama himself, the Buddha of Hell. Through the divine touch of the Lord of Death, the narrator immediately experiences nonduality, which he identifies as the “saving grace” and “catalyst” for liberation (34). The guiding figure of Yama, described as “a gray, masculine body surrounded by flames” (34), is later in the narrative flanked by Janna Sophia, “a young feminine deity-like presence” (63). This female guide – whose name, a composite of Hebrew and Greek terms, refers to “divine mercy” and “knowledge” – is to Bercholz one and the same with the Buddha of Hell. Janna Sophia’s compassionate and motherly essence, that the author wanted akin to that of the female bodhisattva Tārā, is tellingly visualized by Pema Namdol Thaye as an androgynous winged creature – an angel of biblical memory. The function of Bercholz’s spirit guides is not to lead, rather to show. Immanent and aloof, they turn the author’s attention to various scenes, so that he could witness the horrors brought forth by wrong views. In many ways, the two buddha-like figures are the ultimate expression of the cultural hybridity and intertextuality of Bercholz’s graphic memoir: whether consciously or unconsciously, the author flagrantly morphs his mentors on Western literary tropes. Like a Dante Alighieri *sui generis*, Bercholz tours the hells escorted by his own Virgil (Yama) and Beatrice (Janna Sophia), safe in the realization that “there [is] no judgment” (29), and what is seen are merely projections of a deluded mind.

## Conclusion

As any journey home, ours too brought us back to where we started. I began my discussion lamenting the difficulty of evaluating otherworld journeys from a literary point of view and I will end it on the same note. Is Samuel Bercholz really the first American *delok*? Can we even talk of *delok* in a Western context? I cannot claim to have answers to either question, but I will offer a few preliminary observations, in the hope that future scholarship may shed some light on the matter.

Accounts of returns from death are numerous and ubiquitous. Regardless of time, space, and culture, they share common features, as they address similar human hopes and fears, but they do so in a culturally and historically specific way. As previous studies have shown (Pommaret, *Les Revenants de l'Au-delà* 86–100), *delok* literature did not emerge in a literary vacuum. Chinese and Indo-Iranian themes connected to the underworld, such as the judgment of the dead, the realm of the ghosts, and *katábasis*, were adopted and adapted in the Tibetan world. Here indigenous ideas on death and afterlife merged with Mahayanic and Vajrayanic notions, in a popularization of religious tenets of which *delok* narratives are expression (Cuevas *Travels in the Netherworld*).

The diffusion (and increasing popularity) of Tibetan Buddhism in the West makes Bercholz's labeling as *delok* less ludicrous than we may expect. Interpreting his near-death experience(s) in the light of the teachings imparted to him by his Tibetan masters, the author aims to offer solace to his readers. Gone are the judgment of deeds and the external salvific interventions (no mention is made to either saintly saviors or *maṇi-mantra*) of traditional *delok* literature. Bercholz is not interested in offering instructions on how to behave or alleviate the sufferings of the damned, as he believes that the ultimate "grace" (note the loaded term) and "catalyst" of salvation may be easily reached once one abandons wrong views of nonduality and nihilism. The court of Yama – with its terrifying and unavoidable justice – simply sits too close for comfort to apocalyptic visions of Evangelical tradition and has no place in his journey to enlightenment and self-awareness.<sup>17</sup>

The author's confident approach is in many ways the outcome of Western cultural perceptions of the self, which is the most intriguing difference between traditional *delok* narratives and *A Guided Tour of Hell*. The authority of the autobiographical subject, that in the Tibetan cases lies completely on otherworld journey, is in Bercholz's writing unapologetically self-referential. To be doubted is, in his case, the near-death experience itself, paradoxically the only thing *delok* never question. Their journey is an intrinsically communal experience, as they embody in themselves the average human being, with their flaws and their merits. Their testimony confirms the truth of religious and social beliefs, consolidating a sense of community belongingness. The same cannot be said of Bercholz's memoir. His narrative is intensely individualist and self-reliant. The damned, phantasmagorical in their appearance, are to the awakened mind nothing more than holograms. He does not interact with them, cannot even speak to them. Where the *delok* are participant observers, he is a passive spectator. His narrative – "part personal experience, part fiction" (viii) – is offered as a sort of self-help to any reader who is going through their own personal hell.

Such apparently irreconcilable discrepancy, paradigmatic of the difficulties of translating Tibetan Buddhism into a Western context, is partially resolved in the commonality of intentions. As traditional *delok* before him, Bercholz too is moved by loving-kindness and compassion toward fellow human beings. In signing the intersubjective pact between himself and his readers, the author aims at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life, according to Tibetan Buddhist tenets. The graphic and gory details of his narrative, in their intensity equal to those of traditional *delok* literature, are conveyed to the Western reader through illustrations, in a transposition of the *thangka* painting used by the *maṇi pa* in their storytelling. By opting for a Western-style comic art, Pema Namgyel Thaye intentionally adopts a medium that American readers are familiar with to stimulate their engagement and ease their immersion in a context that is deeply "other". Regardless of its literary value, *A Guided Tour of Hell* undoubtedly situates itself among new forms of life narratives that push the limits of the genre and open new issues of self-placement within a context of cultural adaptation and religious

integration. Samuel Bercholz may have been the first American *delok*, but it remains to be seen whether he will be the last.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On the Tibetan auto/biographical tradition and life writing in general, see, among others, Gyatso (1998), Jacoby (2014), and the volumes edited by Connermann and Rheingans (2013) and Galli and Erhard (2021).
- <sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Epstein (1982, 1990), Pommaret (1989, 1992, 1997, 2012), Cuevas (2008), and, more recently, Prude (2016).
- <sup>3</sup> Treasure-texts, or *terma* (*gter ma*), are spiritual instructions allegedly concealed by enlightened beings for future times. Central to this process is the figure of the treasure-revealer, or *tertön* (*gter ston*), a realized master whose agency is vital for the re-emergence of this material. The treasure tradition (*gter lungs*) plays a key role in the “Old School”, or Nyingma (rNying ma), of Tibetan Buddhism, whereby the concealment of treasures is mostly reconducted to the eight-century Indian master Padmasambhava, simply known as Guru Rinpoche.
- <sup>4</sup> Guided by Theosophical ideas and Hindu new-Vedantin teachings, Evans-Wentz decontextualized the mortuary text, connecting it to an imaginary “art of dying”, the symbolism of which he believed to be the expression of an ancient and universal wisdom. The choice of the title itself was a direct reference to the Egyptian funerary text known in English as *The Book of the Dead*. On the figure of Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz and his tetralogy, see, in particular, Lopez (2011).
- <sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the amount of information is barely enough to place the narrator into their social texture. The *delok* have care to present themselves and their parents, their birthplace as well as their role in the community, but omit any relevant date, such as those of their birth or otherworld experience. In lack of a colophon, approximative dating may only be attempted in the presence of cross-textual references (Pommaret 2012).
- <sup>6</sup> *’od thams cad rang ’od | zer thams cad rang zer | gzugs thams cad rang gzugs | sgra thams cad rang sgra yin | rang sems mdang yin* (Gling bza’ chos skyid 310–311). For translations of selected excerpts of the most popular *delok* narratives, including that of Lingza Chökyi, see Epstein (1982), Pommaret (1989), and Cuevas (2008).
- <sup>7</sup> For the sake of comparison, it is worth noticing that medieval returners also exhibited modest posture, and coaxing was frequently required to extol their tale. Such reticence, originally ascribable to real pressures intrinsic to the patronage system and monastic discipline, became in time a literary trope (Zaleski 81), a process that we see in *delok* literature too.
- <sup>8</sup> I will here follow Matthew Kapstein’s rendering of *maṇi padme* as appellative of Avalokiteśvara. According to such interpretation, much in line with the Indian and Tibetan understanding of the Sanskrit original, the mantra translates to “[possessor] of jewel and lotus”, both items part of the bodhisattva’s iconography. The terms *om* and *hūṃ* are symbolic, untranslatable utterances (“The Royal Way of Supreme Compassion” 71).
- <sup>9</sup> Maudgalyāyana’s *katābhis* is a popular Mahayanic tale. According to the legend, the second chief disciple of Buddha Śākyamuni travelled by magical power (*rddhi*) to hell in search of his mother. Despite the saint’s intervention, the woman could not be liberated, as she had to expiate her *karma* and suffer rebirth after rebirth (Epstein, “On the History and Psychology of the ‘Das-log” 29–30).
- <sup>10</sup> The tale of the eleventh-century female *delok* Nangsa Öbum (sNang sa ’od ’bum), in its operatic version, is still performed as a theatrical play today. It is noteworthy though that the line between drama and recital is thin. In the *buchen* (*bu chen*) tradition of Spiti, the storytellers do



not limit themselves to support their recitation with *thangka* but physically engage with the tales, in a dramatization clearly fashioned on Alche Lhamo (*al che lha mo*), the Tibetan opera. *Buchen*, literally “great son”, represent a local variant of the term *lochen* (*blo chen*), by which the *mañi pa* are also known. Both *buchen* and *lochen* (literally “great translator”) refer to the origin of the storytelling tradition, customarily ascribed to the fifteenth-century master Ratnabhadra, or Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 1489–1563) in Tibetan. Disciple of Thangtong Gyalpo (Thang stong rgyal po, 1361/85–1464/85), the “father” of Alche Lhamo, *lochen* Ratnabhadra is said to have been the first of the *mañi pa*. On the origin of *lochen/mañi pa*, see Gelle (2012) and Cuevas (*Travels in the Netherworld* 123–136); on the *buchen* tradition, see Sutherland and Tashi (2011). For a comprehensive study of Alche Lhamo, see Henrion-Dourcy (2017).

- <sup>11</sup> I am here referring to the different forewords, introductions, annotations, commentaries, and afterwards accompanying the different editions and publications of the text since its first appearance in 1927. These authoritative (and sometimes conflicting) interpretations, which by themselves double the length of the work they comment upon, have become in time the most popular and widely read “Tibetan” text in the West (Lopez 6).
- <sup>12</sup> Patrul Rinpoche, or Orgyen Jikme Chökyi Wangpo (O rgyan ’jigs med chos kyi dbang po), was a Nyingma and Dzogchen (rDzog chen) teacher and renowned scholar. A prolific author, he belonged to the tradition of wandering practitioner.
- <sup>13</sup> Multiple near-death experiences are also reported in the life narrative of Dawa Drolma (Zla ba sgrol ma, d. 1941), a famous female *delok* and mother of the Nyingma master Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche (lCags mdud sprul sku rin po che, 1930–2002). Dawa Drolma’s account is a real *namthar*, as she journeys in the realms of hell and heaven with the self-awareness of a *yoginī*. For an English translation of her *delok* narrative, see Dawa Drolma (1995).
- <sup>14</sup> Modern near-death experiences are generally described as pleasant and conducive to self-awareness (Zaleski 113–116). There are cases though in which the out-of-body sensation accompanying the event is perceived as negative and anxiogenic (Boer 2020).
- <sup>15</sup> Any reflection on Orientalist stereotyping in modern American popular culture is beyond the scope of the present article. It will suffice to draw attention to the choice of specific cultural, religious, and ethnic groups in relation to terrorism (Muslim), violent tribalism (African), mass-murder and dehumanization (East Asian).
- <sup>16</sup> Generally speaking, male *delok*, such as the sixteenth-century Lama Jampa Delek (Bla ma Byams pa bde legs) or the eighteenth-century Jangchup Senge (Byang chub seng ge), display a remarkable knowledge of the stages of death and even, in Lama Jampa Delek’s case, of advanced tantric practices. Any awareness of more formal, canonical ideas of death and afterlife present in certain female *delok* narratives, like those of the seventeenth-century Karma Wangzi (Karma dbang ’dzin) or the twentieth-century Dawa Drolma, may be ascribed to former religious training. See Pommaret (1989) and Cuevas (2008).
- <sup>17</sup> It is worth noticing here the tendency among most Western *dharma* converts to praise Buddhism as scientific and rational, grounded on reason and individual experience while embracing meditation and rituals, the practice-based features of which still reflect folk-religious and shamanic aspects (Baumann and Prebish 3). For a study of Buddhism in the West, see, in particular, the volume edited by Prebish and Baumann (2002).

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# Beyond Fact and Fiction: Towards a Multifaceted Understanding of Tibetan Autobiography

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RACHAEL GRIFFITHS

**Abstract:** Autobiography was, and still is, a popular historical and literary genre in Tibet, providing invaluable insights into the lives and times they describe. Although scholarship on Tibetan autobiographical writing has increased considerably over the last two decades, there remains a tension between historicity and narratological embellishment. As such, Tibetologists have generally approached autobiography as historiography or hagiography, overlooking the complex and sometimes conflicting elements at play within a text.

A recent collection of essays on Tibetan life writing titled *The Selfless Ego: Configurations of Identity in Tibetan Life Writing* acknowledges the heterogeneity of autobiography, proposing innovative approaches that move beyond the antinomy of fact and fiction, to open new avenues of multidisciplinary investigation and analysis. In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate the potential of such an approach through analysing the identification process of Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor (Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor, 1704–1788), as detailed in his autobiography. Through redirecting attention away from literary conventions typical of a Tibetan autobiography, such as auspicious incidences and recollections of previous lives, and focusing instead on the individuals involved in the process, this paper explores the significance of this narrative in shining light on the social, institutional, and political networks of Amdo (northeastern Tibet) in the early eighteenth-century and, in turn, upholding the author's self-expression in a cultural and religious context.

**Keywords:** life writing, Tibetan literature, eighteenth-century, networks

## Introduction

An autobiography is the truest of all books; for while it inevitably consists mainly of extinctions of the truth, shirkings of the truth, partial revealments of the truth, with hardly an instance of plain straight truth, the remorseless truth is there, between the lines. (Twain 373)

Since emerging as a field in the 1960s, autobiographical studies has been concerned with truth and fiction. Traditionally, truthfulness was interpreted as consistency with biographical and historical facts, which could be verified through other sources. “Second-wave critics” understood truth to be a more complex and problematic phenomenon (Smith and Watson 122–135). Influential writers such as Barthes, Derrida, and de Man moved beyond traditional interpretations of autobiography to reflect on epistemological difficulties, recasting issues of genre, referentiality, subjectivity, and fictionality. Postmodernist and poststructuralist thinkers have probed the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, analysing the relationship between life and text, and the narrator and historical personage of the author. While centred in literary studies, other disciplines have also contributed to discussions of reality and truth, encompassing – to name a few examples – memory and meaning-making in neuroscience, individuality and social construction in anthropology, and the performativity of gender in gender

studies.<sup>1</sup> This not only demonstrates its continued relevance and prevalence, but also draws attention to how autobiography sits on the borderlines between many fields of study, adding further levels and complexity to questions on genre, truth, authenticity, and the perspectives of the author.

Similar themes can be observed within Tibetan studies, where scholarship on autobiographical writing has increased considerably over the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> The overlap between Tibetan biography (*rnam thar*) and autobiography (*rang rnam*), for example, where disciples have edited and perhaps even finished the autobiography of a teacher, raises questions on embellishment and credibility (Yamamoto 149–154). Moreover, the term *rnam thar* translates as ‘complete liberation’, referencing the deep-rooted religious nature of these texts. Tibetan autobiographies often repeat idealised patterns modelled on the hagiographies of the Buddha and other Buddhist saints and include common themes such as miraculous signs, predictions, advanced learning abilities, and the workings of cause and effect (Ramble 299–300; Roesler 119–132), thus blurring the lines between literature, religious text, and historical testimony.

Tibetologists have generally approached autobiography as historiography or hagiography, sifting for verifiable facts and details of Buddhist doctrine and ritual and/or used the texts to reconstruct a historical actor’s activities, motivations, and intentions, discarding the rest. Gyatso and Roesler have both made convincing arguments against such simplistic categorisations, noting that they do a disservice to the texts themselves by reducing them to a single formation, a historical source or didactic model (Gyatso, “Apparitions of the Self” 103–109; Roesler 116–119). Janet Gyatso refers to this as the “functionalist fallacy: the idea that something is created intentionally to serve a rational, if not instrumental, social agenda” (“Turning Personal” 230). This blinkered approach ignores the complex and sometimes conflicting elements at play within an autobiographical text, overlooking, for example, the relationship between self and social context, and the rhetorical and narrative devices employed.

A recent collection of essays on Tibetan life writing titled *The Selfless Ego: Configurations of Identity in Tibetan Life Writing* acknowledges the heterogeneity of autobiography, proposing innovative approaches that move beyond the antinomy of fact and fiction, to open new avenues of multidisciplinary investigation and analysis. The distinction made by Arnaud Schmitt between “emersion” and “immersion” in the readerly experience of autobiography offers useful considerations here (99–104). Although Schmitt’s focus is on readerly empathy and the need to hold back immersion to keep in mind the person behind the text, the idea of emersion also offers a reading practice that recognises the dynamic and multi-generic nature of autobiography. Through “a process of defocusing, of remaining at the surface of a text” (126), the blinkers are removed, acknowledging the world outside the text, the world in which the subject’s experiences occurred, and in which the subject exists beyond the text. This approach enables more flexible reading, enriching how we examine and understand Tibetan autobiographies.

In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate the potential of such an approach through analysing aspects of the identification process of the celebrated lama, Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor (Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal ‘byor, 1704–1788),<sup>3</sup> as detailed in his autobiography. It is a retrospective account, penned some 60 years after the events took place, which combines memories and stories he claims to have heard from others. As such, these recollections can be seen as cultural and collective, rather than simply individual. They shed light on the religious and political networks of Amdo (northeastern Tibet) in the early eighteenth-century, whilst also revealing something of the position of Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor within society. In describing the key players in his identification, we glimpse what Susan Friedman calls the “geographics” of subjectivity, the spatial

mapping of identities (19), in which Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor can be seen as a product of, and actor within, multiple networks and locations.

Writing about these experiences also enables him to structure and shape his own narrative, explaining the adult self that he becomes. His recollections of early teachers, who served as role models and influenced his outlook, lay the groundwork for understanding his life course and reactions to events later in life. These stories, then, are more than simply childhood accounts. They also serve to represent and/or consolidate the identity of the author in adulthood.

### Biography of Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor

Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor, who will henceforth be referred to as Sumpa Khenpo, was a renowned Gélukpa (dGe lugs pa) scholar from Amdo, a region at the crossroads of Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian cultures. By the time Sumpa Khenpo was born, the Gélukpa school was a multi-ethnic tradition that dominated Tibetan politics and religion. They enjoyed the patronage of many Mongol nobles in Amdo and Mongolia, as well as the Manchu emperors of the Qing Empire (1644–1911), further consolidating their influence.

He was born in Toli (Tho li), a predominantly Mongolian region, in 1704. According to his autobiography, his family were Mongols, although he was educated in Tibetan. At the age of seven, he was recognised as the rebirth (*sprul sku*) of Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen (Sum pa zhabs drung blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, d. 1702). He was escorted to Gönlung monastery (dGon lung byams pa gling, founded in 1604), the seat of the Sumpa lineage, where he was educated for over a decade. In 1723, he travelled to Central Tibet, where he studied and received his full monastic ordination from the Fifth Pañchen Lama, Lozang Yéshé (Blo bzang ye shes, 1663–1737). He returned to Amdo in 1731, where he was based for the remainder of his life, serving as abbot of Gönlung monastery on three separate occasions. Yet his scholarly and administrative career took him on journeys across Amdo, Mongolia, and twice to the Qing court at the Qianlong Emperor's (1711–1799) invitation. He is renowned, both in Tibet and Mongolia, as a prolific writer, composing works on history, geography, poetics, and medicine, alongside his extensive autobiography.

Sumpa Khenpo's autobiography, *A Description of the Activities of the Excellent Paṇḍita Sumpa Yéshé Penjor*, [which is like] *Nectar for the Ear* (Paṇḍi ta sum pa ye shes dpal 'byor mchog gi spyod tshul brjod pa sgra 'dzin bcud len), can be found in volume eight of his *Collected Works* and spans 294 folios in total. The colophon of the autobiography states that it was composed in 1776 ("Paṇḍi ta sum pa" 957; folio 292(b)),<sup>4</sup> however Sumpa Khenpo passed away before its completion, resulting in two of his disciples penning the remainder in 1794 ("Paṇḍi ta sum pa" 668; folio 258(b)). Standard Tibetan Buddhist tropes and accounts of his religious deeds and achievements evidently inform the narrative, however, it also includes details of networks that underpinned religious and patronage practices, developments in the Gélukpa tradition in Amdo and Mongolia, and the individuals and events that had a profound impact on his life.

### Networks, Community, and Self

Sumpa Khenpo's account of his identification as the rebirth of Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen spans 14 folios in length ("Paṇḍi ta sum pa" 28–37; folio 11(b)–18(b)). Alongside conventional tales of visions and miracles, and reports of his dedication to spiritual aspirations, Sumpa Khenpo's account provides details of the processes and individuals involved in his recognition. The people concerned were not

just the subject of his writing; they were also an essential component of his identity – as a person, community member, and influential Gélukpa figure – providing legitimacy and embedding himself within the wider religious community.

The Sumpa lineage was relatively new, having been established during the zenith of new Gélukpa incarnations in Amdo (Tuttle 44), and was deeply connected to the formation of Gönlung monastery, where the lineage was based. The first Sumpa, Damchö Gyeltsen (Dam chos rgyal mtshan) was the seventh abbot of Gönlung monastery and related to the first abbot of Gönlung, Sumpa Damchö Gyatso (Sum pa dam chos rgya mtsho). The second Sumpa, Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, was closely associated with Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden (lCang skya ngag dbang blo bzang chos ldan, 1642–1714), another important incarnation lineage tied to Gönlung monastery, accompanying him to Beijing to visit the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722) in 1693 and 1701 (Kim 134–135; Sullivan 140, 142).

As a recently established lineage, recognising an incarnation would require confirmation from multiple sources to bolster the claim. Within Sumpa Khenpo's autobiography, I have found three forms of recognition: the advocacy of prominent and respected Gélukpa figures, political support, and the backing of the local religious community. Tracing the individuals involved in conferring this recognition is valuable for exploring interpersonal relations, institutional alliances, patterns of patronage, and the crucial interplay of these diverse sources of legitimation within society, which were not only spiritual in nature, but played a role in consolidating political and economic influence and power. Moreover, in narrating this process, Sumpa Khenpo locates himself within these religious, political, and personal networks, shaping his identity and paving the way for later events and experiences.

### *Gélukpa Networks*

Sumpa Khenpo opens by describing the catalyst for his identification. In 1710, Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden met with Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé ('Jam dbyangs bzhad pa'i rdo rje, 1648–1722), another celebrated lama from Amdo and a former student of Changkya, at Gönlung monastery. They discussed, among other things, locating the reincarnation of the second Sumpa:

When he (i.e., Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé) went to meet with Changkya Rinpoché,<sup>5</sup> one day Changkya Rinpoché gave him a beautiful *khatak* (*kha btags*, ceremonial scarf) and said, “My friend who accompanied me to China called Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, a Kadampa (bKa gdams pa) geshé,<sup>6</sup> has died. I entrust you to look for his reincarnation.” Jamyang Zhépé [Dorjé] replied, “I will find him.” (“Paṇḍi ta sum pa” 29; folio 12(a))

Immediately Sumpa Khenpo reaffirms the close relationship between the Changkya and Sumpa lineages, with Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden acting as the driving force in locating the incarnation of “a great teacher.” His autobiography suggests that this relationship deepens throughout his life. He recalls regularly meeting with the third Changkya, Rölpe Dorjé (Rol pa'i rdo rje, 1717–1786), who appears to be an inspiring and significant figure in his life. For example, during Sumpa Khenpo's first term as abbot of Gönlung monastery (1746–1749), Changkya Rölpe Dorjé successfully sways him to expand the curriculum beyond exoteric Buddhist studies (*mtshan nyid*) to include Sanskrit grammar, medicine, and astrology (“Paṇḍi ta sum pa” 278; folio 106(b)–107(a)). This nods to a complex generational network of incarnate lamas serving as each other's teachers and disciples, which deepened affiliations and strengthened influence through mutual recognition. In the case of Sumpa and Changkya, this monastery-based network would also help sustain Gönlung's estates and regional authority through maintaining a sense of unity and continuity.



Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden was based mainly at the Qing court in Beijing, and so it is unsurprising that he tasked his close friend and disciple with locating Sumpa's reincarnation. The partnership between Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden and Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé played a significant role in the spread and development of Gélukpa institutional life in Amdo, including the establishment of Gönlung's tantric college (Sullivan 224–228) and Labrang monastery (Bla brang), another major Gélukpa institution in Amdo. Against this backdrop, the role of these two religious elites in the identification process not only asserts the importance of the Sumpa lineage, but also implies the support of their associated networks and firmly situates Sumpa Khenpo within them. It also identifies and places him within a pro-Qing contingent of Gélukpa lamas, who saw cooperation with the Qing network of Manchus and Mongols as key to the future of the Gélukpa tradition. This appears to have affected his outlook and life course, as Sumpa Khenpo spends his later life establishing and deepening networks across the Qing Empire.

### *Political Networks*

Sumpa Khenpo claims that Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé enlisted the help of a local Mongol leader, Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap (Er ti ni tha'i ji tshang ba skyabs),<sup>7</sup> the great-grandson of Güshri Khan (1582–1655):

Due to his previous good fortune, the son of Berotsana (Bai ro tsa na), the great-grandson of Güshri Tendzin Chögyel (Gu shri bstan dzin chos rgyal), and lord of the Baatud (Pā thud) clan, called Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap was born into a marvellous lineage and clan. Despite these [origins] and being respected by many chiefs, he did not possess any qualities of arrogance and haughtiness. He had charismatic power, great confidence, courage, bravery, and wisdom.

He was articulate and his depth was unfathomable. He spoke sincerely, having abandoned dishonest and crude speech, and possessed strong intentions and awareness without deception. His mental stream was acquainted with the dharma and nurtured (lit. moistened) by kindness and compassion. He was steadfastly benevolent to those without refuge, protection, and relatives. Everything he did was motivated by the triple gem and he devoted himself solely to promoting the excellent tradition of the yellow hat (the Gélukpa school). He would frequently study Tsongkhapa's (1357–1419) teachings on the lamrim path and became an exceptional student of Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé.

He went to the residence of my chief and asked, "Who is there amongst your clan that believes to be an incarnation?" The chief promptly dispatched a messenger to search in all directions. Because my parents said [to the messenger], "We have a seven-year-old son with the good propensity of a monk," that messenger went to report to the chief and lama. ("Paṇḍi ta sum pa" 30–31; folio 12(a)–(b))

The role of Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap, although minor in this account, is significant. As a relative of Güshri Khan, who is celebrated for his role in advancing and promoting Gélukpa hegemony throughout most of Tibet (Karmay 71–73), his reputation would have been intrinsically linked to the protection and promotion of the Gélukpa tradition. After all, it ran in the family: Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap's grandfather, Dorje Dalai Baatur, was close to the Fifth Dalai Lama and is listed as one of his disciples (Schwieger 128–129; Ujeed 265–266). Moreover, his uncle, Ganden Tséwang Pelzang (dGa' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang), was a general to the Fifth Dalai Lama, leading troops from Lhasa in the Ladakhi war of 1679–1684 (Venturi, 41–46).

It is also worth noting that Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap's family were connected to Gönlung monastery, reinforcing his significance in locating Sumpa. Güshri Khan is said to have enhanced Gönlung's estates through donating large portions of land (Sullivan



87–91). Dorje Dalai Baatur was also a notable patron of the monastery. So much so that Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden visited him on his deathbed and performed rituals on his behalf (Sullivan 135). And so, the support of a powerful Gönlung patron can be seen as a crucial step in legitimising and strengthening the authority of Sumpa Khenpo. Of course, this relationship worked both ways, with the role of Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap in the identification process reinforcing his own reputation as a potent and active benefactor. This reputation is further bolstered by Sumpa Khenpo's description of his religious disposition, which is linked to the qualities of an effective and benevolent ruler. Parallels can be drawn here with praises of other Mongol nobility found in his autobiography, who are often applauded for their intelligence, religious devotion, and mastery of speech; favourable qualities in a leader (Griffiths 141–145). Sumpa Khenpo also notes that Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap was a student of Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé, which is attested in the latter's biography ('Jam dbyangs bzhad pa dkon mchog 'jigs med dbang po 206–207). This exemplifies the close connection between high-ranking Gélukpa lamas in Amdo and Mongol nobility, which was based on geographic, political, and religious ties.

Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap's link to Sumpa Khenpo extends beyond his family's reputation and connection to Gönlung. Sumpa Khenpo documents that Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap was the lord of the Baatud, one of the four Oirad Mongol groups. Interestingly, when describing his paternal lineage earlier in his autobiography, he notes that his father was a Taiji within the Baatud, thus implying he was from Mongolian nobility. The close relationship between the Gélukpa hierarchy and Mongolian nobility is nothing new,<sup>8</sup> but in drawing attention to Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap's association with the Baatud, Sumpa Khenpo distinguishes himself as a member of Erdeni Taiji's community. This suggests that this facet of his identity was important to him and his sense of self, as exemplified in his reference to the Tibetan proverb, "if you don't know your [patri]lineage, you are no better than a monkey in a forest. If you don't know your maternal lineage, you are like a fake turquoise dragon" ("Paṇḍi ta sum pa" 23; folio 9(b)). This assertion may also be an act of resistance against the decline of the Baatud in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, following campaigns against them (Natsagdorj and Ochir 524). By the time of Sumpa Khenpo, the majority of the Baatud had been absorbed by other Mongol groups in the region, and so this could also be an attempt to enshrine a fading community.

### *Personal Networks*

The parties introduced so far, aside from Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden, are connected only loosely to the Sumpa lineage. This is not an attempt to downplay their role, but it acknowledges an added, and I believe important, component to the recognition process, an emotional and historical connection. This deeper connection establishes authenticity in a different way, through a personal and private association that, theoretically, cannot be forged. This point becomes more salient later in the eighteenth-century with growing claims of corruption within the incarnation system, culminating in the Qianlong Emperor reforming the selection process for reincarnations of prominent lamas in 1792 (Oidtmann 61–75). Sumpa Khenpo also addresses institutional corruption throughout his autobiography, noting his concerns regarding deception and false lamas (Griffiths 203–217).

This final form of recognition, then, in which an individual recognises their deceased teacher, or friend, acts as the last stamp of approval, giving the final nod that the individual in question possesses the extraordinary qualities of his previous incarnation. This process is definitive, a statement of affiliation that immediately invests the identified

lama with the authority to continue the lineage. In the case of Sumpa Khenpo, he recounts two tales of moving reunions: one with a friend and another with a former attendant. He acknowledges that he heard similar stories, but no longer remembers them (“Paṇḍi ta sum pa” 45; folio 18(a)), suggesting, perhaps, that these two tales had particular significance for him.

The first he hears from Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé (Ngag dbang 'phrin las, 1661–1726) and Sertri (gSer khri) Rinpoché, who recount the circumstances of the meeting to Sumpa Khenpo later in life:

“The day before then, when I (i.e., Sertri Rinpoché) met with the child (i.e., Sumpa Khenpo), I asked him, ‘Who are you?’ And he replied, ‘I am Lama Sempa (Sems pa).’

I asked him, ‘Where have you come from?’ He said, ‘I came from China.’

I asked, ‘Did you come on horse or by foot?’ He replied, ‘None of those. It appears I have come in a different way.’ Because he had come through the bardo stages,<sup>9</sup> I said, ‘Yes, that is true,’ and prodded him with my finger.

Then I asked, ‘If you are a lama, why are you wearing sheep’s skin?’ He answered back, ‘Well, in that case, why are you wearing a fur cloak?’ I was speechless. Again, I asked, ‘If you are a lama, teach the dharma.’ He replied, ‘Can’t one forget?’ For the third time, I was speechless. Because of this, I said, ‘As you have boxed me in (i.e., defeated me), in the future you will be a wise one. A tsal!’ And patted him on the head.

Then I asked, ‘From among those in the tent, who do you recognise?’ Looking at Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé, he said, ‘I recognise that one.’ I said [to Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé], ‘Tonight, stay with this boy in your lodgings and ask him questions.’

So he did, and he asked the boy, ‘If you recognise me, what is my name?’ The boy replied, ‘You are Trinlé.’ Géshé [Ngakwang Trinlé] teared up.” (“Paṇḍi ta sum pa” 31–32; folio 12(b)–13(a))

The story continues; when Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé was asked if he knew of anyone called Sempa, he described his friend Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, who was timid and easily defeated when it came to public debating, but an unbeatable force when debating in private. Sumpa Khenpo’s ability to recognise Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé, alongside his remarkable debating skills, present even at a young age, secured his recognition as the rebirth of Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen.

Interestingly, Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé and Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé were also acquaintances – the latter had observed Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé debating and was impressed with his ability (Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor, “Paṇḍi ta sum pa”, 35; folio 14(a)), later inviting him to Labrang monastery (bsTan pa bstan 'dzin, vol. 1 619–620). This is significant as it once again highlights the intricate web of networks in early eighteenth-century Amdo that contributed to the maintenance and development of the Gélukpa school.

The second meeting took place after Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé and Sertri Rinpoché formally identified Sumpa Khenpo. Lozang Raptén (Blo bzang rab brtan) was sent by Sumpa Chöjé Püntsock Namgyel (Sum pa chos rje phun tshogs nam rgyal, d. 1740), a former attendant of Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, for further authentication. As is customary when authenticating a rebirth, the young Sumpa Khenpo was identified by Lozang Raptén due to his ability to recognise objects belonging to his predecessor. Lozang Raptén presented him with books, a rosary (*phreng ba*), a water canteen (*chab ril*), and a small collection of prayers, all belonging to Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, alongside unrelated objects:

One morning, that monk (i.e., Lozang Raptén) arrived at the home of the young boy (i.e., Sumpa Khenpo), and the child claimed, “Today, someone will bring my books.” [Lobsang

Rapten] had just arrived, and [the young boy] came to welcome him, clutching robes. Tears and rejoicing competed within him. When [the monk] showed him books and so forth, the child took the old ones and said, “These are mine.” The lama asked, “What is your house like?” And it is said the boy babbled, “It is a red house with many trees in front of it.” (‘Paṇḍi ta sum pa’ 44–45; folio 17(b))

Sumpa Khenpo ends the story by suggesting that the red house he had mentioned as a child was most likely Gönlung hermitage (dGon lung ri khrod) – a hermitage near Gönlung monastery that was closely affiliated with the Sumpa lineage (Sullivan 39–40) – further supporting his status as a reincarnated lama and his association with Gönlung monastery. It is unclear who Lozang Rapten was or the nature of his relationship with the Sumpa lineage, indicating that he was not as renowned as the other figures discussed. Nevertheless, even minor local players, who do not have a significant historical presence, were involved in the process, pointing to the diversity of individuals involved. It also implies that local communities impacted on, and invested in, monastic activities, including the identification process.

In (re)framing the focus on the processes at play, Sumpa Khenpo’s account of his identification offers us a valuable source of information concerning the vast and complex connections between monasteries, patrons, lamas, and the community, as well as his position within them. The temporal relations he describes are not formed in empty spaces or time; they are situated within, and shaped by, historically shifting power dynamics. As such, Sumpa Khenpo should be seen as a product of his environment, shedding light on social structures, norms, identities, changes etc. At the same time, it draws attention to his identity as a configuration of constituent parts, which includes belonging to a pro-Qing contingent of the Gélukpa school, Baatud nobility, the community of Gönlung, and the Sumpa lineage. Recognising and acknowledging these inherent aspects of his identity lays the foundation for understanding Sumpa Khenpo and the context of his life. The following section explores this further, examining the role of his teachers and mentors in his formative years in developing his sense of self, written from a vantage point that allows the overall significance of these encounters to emerge.

### Blurring Conformity and Self-Expression

Autobiographical narrators are at the centre of the historical pictures they assemble and are interested in the meaning of larger forces, conditions, or events for their own stories. When describing the events surrounding his identification, Sumpa Khenpo also reflects on an indebtedness to a past that suggests a continuing value for him at the time of composing his autobiography. In particular, he talks about his teachers, who were a formative part of his youth and shaped his maturation. Although praises of teachers are commonplace in Tibetan autobiographical and biographical writings, I believe they have a wider significance. These tributes also unearth the compost from within which Sumpa Khenpo was formed; they shed light on the when, how, and from whom he acquired his norms. These narratives capture his formative years, the individuals involved, and their lasting impression on Sumpa Khenpo.

Once Sumpa Khenpo was identified, he was sent to study with Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso (Thar shul chos skyong rgya mtsho), another Amdo lama. Similar to many of the other individuals introduced, Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso was connected to Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé. Both were at Drépung monastery (‘Bras spungs) in Central Tibet at the same time, and it is said that Jamyang Zhépé was greatly impressed by Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso (Blo bzang bstan pa rgya mtsho and dGe ’dun bstan pa dar rgyas 6–9). This suggests that Sumpa Khenpo was surrounded and educated by Gélukpa teachers who

were carefully selected by Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé and/or Changkya Ngakwang Lozang, perhaps for their competencies and as transmitters of particular teachings.

Both Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé and Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso are listed among Sumpa Khenpo's 33 teachers, credited as two of the four teachers who engaged him in the Buddha's teachings ("Paṇḍi ta sum pa" 678; folio 262(b)).<sup>10</sup> The choice of teacher(s) is also significant as it embeds Sumpa Khenpo within a particular religious network. One that is connected to Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé, Changkya Ngakwang Lozang, and other Gélukpa figures in Amdo with links to Mongol and Qing patrons. This undoubtedly impacted and moulded Sumpa Khenpo's scholarly and administrative career, which anchored him to Amdo and further laid the groundwork for him becoming an intermediary among Tibetan, Mongolian, and Manchu contingents of the wider Gélukpa network.

In his recollections of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso, Sumpa Khenpo employs standard Buddhist imagery and analogies to describe his experiences. Following convention not only exhibits his literary skills, for which he is renowned, but is also helpful in conveying ideas through imagery set within the same culture as the audience it aims to address:

When I arrived in his presence, although he seemed to be old, [he appeared] like the light of dawn striking the golden mountains of the Jambu river ('Dzam bu chu bo),<sup>11</sup> sprinkled with saffron. Having just met him, faith and devotion clearly resided [within me], akin to sunlight meeting dried moss through a magnifying glass, causing a fire. A meeting of internal joy and an external smile and folded hands. It was as if I had planned this.

By day, he would remain in meditation without the slightest distraction. By night, as I would sleep in his presence, often when I looked at him in the light of the butter lamp, he would be sitting cross-legged, with his hat on. He remained in meditation until around midnight, resting slightly backwards. Other than [when on] that cushion, he would not sleep. At lunch, [he ate nothing] apart from curd, milk, wheat, cheese (*thud*), and *tsampa* (*ritsam pa*, roasted barley flour); I had never seen him take meat. And so, all these things couldn't help but increase my tremendous admiration and respect [for him]. ("Paṇḍi ta sum pa" 36; folio 14(b))

Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso appears to serve as a positive resource in Sumpa Khenpo's childhood. He records several examples of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso's influence: bestowing on him the name Lozang Chökyong after taking the vows of the upāsaka (*yong rdzogs dge bsnyen*), motivating his commitment to his vows, and inspiring diligence in his scholarly pursuits. Moreover, his descriptions of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso can be read as a lyrical tribute. He appears not only as a figure to admire, but as an example of an honest, committed, and remarkable figure. This contrasts heavily with themes of corruption and deceit, which are present throughout Sumpa Khenpo's autobiography (Griffiths 213–215). And so, he implies an appreciation for the character and role of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso, a person he would like to develop into himself. In fact, Sumpa Khenpo presents his life as a continuation of the behaviour and skills of his teacher(s), drawing on his own moral conduct as a rhetorical antidote to the immoral behaviour shown by others.

Sumpa Khenpo notes that the decision to write a detailed account of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso, among other teachers, is due to the gratitude he felt for these formative experiences:

I follow the way of Tsongkhapa, who, in his autobiography *Entryway to Faith* (*rNam thar dad pa'i 'jug ngogs*), gives an account of Cakrasaṃvara (dPa' bo rdo rje) alongside his own life. [Moreover] I was thinking how they were my first teachers and that they led me to the rare to find doctrine of the Buddha. Its refuge and protection [like] the cool shade of a white parasol lifted [over] my head, [decorated] with fragments of their wisdom and vast knowledge, many splendid spokes, and trimmings of compassion. As for this intelligence,

the bestowal of kindness, the king of empowerments, the seeds of welfare, prosperity, and bliss on my limbs, it is due solely to the deeds of those [lamas] and not any others such as kings, ministers, parents, relatives, and so on. Even if I offered to completely fill the entire universe with heaps of precious jewels, it would never be enough. Thinking [about it], I rejoice! (“Paṇḍi ta sum pa” 37; folio 15(b))

In citing Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gélukpa school, as his inspiration for discussing his teachers, Sumpa Khenpo once again establishes himself as an ardent Gélukpa scholar who was very much influenced by the actions and legacy of the tradition’s founder. This passage also reflects the clear impression his early teachers had on his young mind, and it appears to have stayed with him well into adulthood.

However, the autobiography also sheds light on the events and processes which shaped his ability to move within and beyond the lives of his teachers and networks. For example, the above sets the scene for his response to the destruction of Gönlung monastery in 1723, which had a marked impact on his life. The place he viewed as home was raised to the ground, the community he valued and cherished was fractured, and one of his most treasured teachers was killed. This event has traditionally been seen as the inflection point of his life (Griffiths 66, 188–203), from which he dedicated his life to Gönlung monastery, its rebuilding, expansion, and promotion, as well as fostering networks of cooperation more broadly across the Qing Empire. However, through examining these aspects of his formative years, we can see the seeds of these trends and values were planted and cultivated long before this traumatic experience. It is through an emersive reading of these early years in Sumpa Khenpo’s autobiography that we can clearly see the blending of fact and fiction, experience and tradition, conformity and self-expression.

## Conclusion

In this way, we return to the opening quotation and the argument that autobiography can open up the possibility of better understanding lives and the contexts in which those lives are lived, revealing glimpses of “the remorseless truth.” Texts inevitably tell us a kind of truth about the lives and times they describe. This narrative truth, which can’t always be authenticated by other sources, offers insight into the thoughts, motivations, everyday actions, and the individual’s perceived place in society. Incorporating new approaches that move beyond fact and fiction and turn our attention towards the layers that make up autobiography, such as sites, patterns of emplotments, and modes of self-inquiry, can enrich the way we understand the lives we read and expose new or lesser-known traits of Tibetan literature, history, and culture.

In this paper, I have employed this approach to re-examine the prominence and description of his teachers and identifiers in his autobiography. This has led to two main strands of insight. The first is the benchmarks and norms set by these individuals and how they pressed upon him the importance of being a sincere Gélukpa practitioner and upholder of the dharma, qualities that he espouses throughout his autobiography and wider teachings. The second is the importance of these individuals in establishing his place in the world and his identity both as a Gélukpa and an actor within a wider community connecting Mongol and Qing patrons. In his writing, he continues to emphasise his place geographically, ethnically, and socially. The identifiers that he mentions are hallmarks of this, from his paternal lineage to the high-ranking Gélukpa figures who were instrumental in his identification, to the teachers and lamas with whom he learnt and practised, to his membership of the Gönlung community. These two strands weave together to go beyond a simple picture of his childhood experience to create a multifaceted impression of his values and his understanding of the world around

him, through which we can see more clearly the confluence of religious, political, and personal networks within his self-expression and better understand how these shaped his actions and reactions later in life.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This barely scratches the surface of the diverse range of interdisciplinary methods used to inform the study of autobiography. For more on research methods, theoretical approaches, and autobiography criticism, see Douglas and Barnwell; Smith and Watson 111–163; Wagner-Egelhaaf vol.1.
- <sup>2</sup> For studies of Tibetan autobiographies, see Bogin; Gamble; Gyatso; Jacoby; Schaeffer; and Yamamoto.
- <sup>3</sup> Tibetan names and terms are given in transliterated form using the Tibetan and Himalayan Library's Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan system, developed by David Germano and Nicolas Tournade. Romanised Tibetan spellings are provided in brackets.
- <sup>4</sup> When referring to Sumpa Khenpo's autobiography, I have chosen to reference both a modern typeset publication from 2001 and a facsimile reproduction of a blockprint version by Lokesh Chandra. Both editions have their difficulties – the modern edition is missing small sections of text and Chandra's reproduction is difficult to read in places – and I have found it helpful to consult both during my research.
- <sup>5</sup> Rinpoché is an honorific title meaning 'precious one'.
- <sup>6</sup> Lit. spiritual friend. Géshé is a Buddhist academic title and often denotes a teacher.
- <sup>7</sup> Erdeni and Taiji are both Mongolian titles. Erdeni translates as 'treasure' or 'precious', and Taiji was a title for nobles.
- <sup>8</sup> See Ahmad 172, 174, 181; Oidtmann 45–60.
- <sup>9</sup> The intermediate state between an individual's death and rebirth. The period between death and rebirth lasts 49 days.
- <sup>10</sup> The other two teachers listed are the Fifth Pañchen Lama and Chuzang Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen (Chu bzang blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, 1652–1723). The latter was abbot of Gönlung monastery when Sumpa Khenpo first joined. He was closely affiliated with local Mongols; Dorje Dalai Baatur, among others, was his patron. In 1723 he was assassinated during the uprising of the Mongol prince Lozang Tendzin (Blo bzang btsan 'dzin). This event had a long-lasting effect on Sumpa Khenpo.
- <sup>11</sup> A mythical river. It is said the river is surrounded by gold sand.

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# Inscribing the True Self, Re-inscribing Masculinities: Experiments with Gender in Gandhi's Writings and Life Narrations

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**Abstract:** One direction taken by autobiography studies is to deconstruct the term itself and examine the concept of life writings against the theoretical interventions that mediate and modulate it. Thus, we often see it leaning towards anti-humanism, which informs poststructuralist, and Post-humanistic perspectives that take an avant-garde leap into life writing imagined in speculative and almost futuristic terms.

This paper proposes to add to and complicate the field of postcolonial autobiography. A significant area of exploration within the elastic genre of life writing studies has to do with the politics of identities and subjectivities. This paper attempts to analyse a few key moments from the life writings of Gandhi, focusing on his corporeal politics. I argue that there is in Gandhi's "experiments with truth" a series of experiments to do with the body which expresses both a consciously crafted gender ambivalence (his grand-niece, Manu, referred to him as her 'mother') and throws a challenge to the concept of the male body of the coloniser, in order to suggest the idea of alternative masculinity.

This paper argues that Gandhi is consciously deploying his self, his body identity/ies and attendant subjectivities, in order to make a political point. He uses his body and body-politics to establish his difference from the colonially attributed native body and mark his distance from colonial models of masculinity. While, in one sense, this fluid body seems almost gender ambivalent, it is also an invitation to re-imagine the contours of Indian identity and subjectivity.

*Keywords:* Autobiography, truth, experiments, gender ambivalence

In this essay, I look at some key issues and critical events in Gandhi's life, as filtered through in some critical readings, to suggest that Gandhi combined the personal with the political in a unique way to forge moral authority through an evolution of a renunciatory masculinity. One way of approaching his autobiography is see it as an unfolding drama of the self, where moral struggles are revealed consciously to show the aspiration towards a state of sexlessness or 'brahmacharya.'

A common thread that runs through the work and writings of both Tagore and Gandhi, is a critique of existing, culturally prescribed and sanctioned models of masculinity as they prevailed in the eastern (Tagore) and western (Gandhi) extremities of India. Both these great men, as public personages, were aware that they were thought-leaders and role models and that examples set by them would be emulated.

In the case of M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948), India's great national leader who is considered to be instrumental in India's throwing off the yoke of colonialism in 1947, there is a conscious experimentation with the "truth", presumably of one's inner self, to oppose certain culturally sanctioned models of masculinity. It is this search for truth which directs his autobiography, a narrative which details his search for an appropriate identity, subjectivity and being in the world. Gandhi focuses a great deal on corporeal issues like food, dietetics as well as ethics and morality. When we focus closely on his corporeal politics, we see in

Gandhi's "experiments with truth" a series of experiments to do with the body which express both a consciously crafted gender ambivalence and which throw a challenge to the concept of the manly body of the coloniser. Here, my point is that Gandhi is consciously deploying his self, his body identity and attendant subjectivities, in order to make a political point. He uses his body and body-politics to establish his difference from the colonially attributed native body and also to mark his distance from colonial models of masculinity. While in one sense, this fluid body seems almost gender ambivalent, it is also an invitation to re-imagine and re-vision stereotypical notions of gender which circulate in cultures.

The historical conjuncture referred to here is late 19<sup>th</sup> and the first two decades of the twentieth century, when the models of masculinity available can be broadly conceptualized as imperial, colonized, traditional and ascetic masculinities. The imperial masculinity model is based on the white imperial 'master', the civil servant, the 'pukka sahib', the kind extolled by Kipling and criticized by E.M. Forster. Coincidentally, this Kiplingesque masculinity, often caricatured, found its takers in people who extolled the muscular, strong masculinity of imperial cultures. Tagore's niece, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani whose fiercely patriotic and nationalistic feelings led to a belief in the importance of militancy, a belief-system which was at odds with her uncle's faith in a sort of global brotherhood and internationalism, writes in her autobiography *Jibaner Jharapata* ("The Scattered Leaves of my Life") that the English character is moulded in the fields of Eton.<sup>1</sup> The Forsterian view that the English public school culture shaped "well developed bodies, under-developed minds and undeveloped hearts" is not known to her, nor would it presumably, find favour.<sup>2</sup> This model also makes its way into Indian discourses where it becomes linked with questions of national character and patriotism. In an interesting essay, "Final Encounter: The Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi" in his book *At the Edge of Psychology*, Ashish Nandy proffers the view that the Indian and Hindu elite and many sections of middle class Indians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century perceived the British as agents of progressive change and accepted the ethos of aggressive imperial masculinities embodied by them.<sup>3</sup> In his reading of the assassination of Gandhi, Nandy reads the caste-class identity of Nathuram Godse, his assassin, as a representative of a social class that felt a sense of emasculation in the contemporary political climate, a discomfort/fact that they held Gandhi responsible for. While Gandhi's moral and political ascendancy was not in doubt, some sections of society felt that Gandhi's counter-intuitive, seemingly irrational politics was a roadblock in the development of a sense of modern 'realpolitik' (Nandy 90).

According to historians and critics like Mrinalini Sinha<sup>4</sup> and Chandrima Chakraborty,<sup>5</sup> there was a developing discourse of de-masculinization and emasculation among the British, where they denigrated the Indian middle class and particularly the Bengali men as weak and effeminate. The British encouraged a stereotyping of colonized masculinities, which dismayed fiercely patriotic nationalists like Sarala Devi, who participated actively in the crafting of militarized masculinities in Bengal. In her autobiography, she recalls the brave and courageous Marathas and feels strongly the lack of a physical culture in Bengal. By instituting some invented rituals like the Birashtami "bratas" commemorating the bravehearts of Bengal, she hoped to instil a sense of nationalism among the youth in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (p.122) She was not the only political leader to move in the direction of defining and conscious crafting of alternative masculinities; the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of a militant 'extremist' wave in Indian politics.

Traditional masculinities in Indian society were steeped in caste-based ritual practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although reformist discourse also impacted models of masculinity and conjugality. The ascetic model is available in *Ananda Math* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and "Char Adhay" (Tagore) and real life characters such as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), albeit delineated with some ambivalence. Chandrima Chakraborty in her book on *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present*

*Imaginations of India* highlights the alignment of asceticism and masculinity in Indian political history, in order for its transformation into a strident symbol of Indian nationalism.” (Chakraborty, 2011: Preface)

### Alternative Masculinities

Gandhi's ambivalent and sometimes controversial attitudes towards sexuality have invited many critical responses, both in his times and later, including from scholars such as Tridib Suhrud.<sup>6</sup> ‘Brahmacharya’ or his experiment that failed, which he discussed openly drew forth a whole host of negative responses, given Gandhi's stature and reputation as an icon of unassailable moral integrity, by this time (1940s). As the “father of the nation”, he could not (and presumably ought not) do anything that could sully his unimpeachable conduct or reputation or prove a questionable role model. Rather, his endeavour was to develop and fashion a masculinity which was predicated on a conscious deployment of anti-colonial masculinities. The core of this masculinity is an emptying out of sexual desire and a move towards realisation of brahmacharya and this journey is outlined in his autobiography.

Gandhi's life journey was marked by profoundly personal, agonizing conflicts concerning matters of sex and about his unwavering commitment to liberate himself from the temptations of the flesh in order to be able reach the ultimate transcendent state of a true brahmachari. For Gandhi, brahmacharya was an all-encompassing philosophical/spiritual concept that went beyond the practice of celibacy and continence. His notion of celibacy incorporated moral and spiritual ideas and thoughts that were to be put into action for the liberation of the soul as well as the freedom of the nation. Gandhi believed that sexual love in a marriage was enervating, which produced males who were effete. Thus, for Gandhi, the sexual instinct needed to be controlled in order for men to retain their physical and spiritual power for the higher purpose of serving the nation.

Gandhi took a vow to observe complete celibacy in 1906 when he was 37-years-old. Several scholars, notably, Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd L. Rudolph, speculated that the tragic circumstances surrounding his father's death and his profound sense of shame and guilt were actually a “crucial turning point in his gradual commitment to asceticism” (51). In his autobiography, Gandhi writes about his deep sense of shame and remorse because his lust and passion had robbed him of his chance of providing the last service to his father and consequently not obtaining the father's blessing before his demise: “The shame to which I have referred to in a foregoing chapter, was this shame of my carnal desire even at the critical hour of my father's death, which demanded wakeful service [...] It's a blot I have never been able to efface or forget” (Gandhi 26).

In keeping with classical Hindu teachings, Gandhi believed in the power of the semen and retaining it was a sign of strength and virility. In order to be a true brahmachari, Gandhi performed various kinds of experiments on himself to see if he could retain body fluids, thus maintaining his spiritual power. One such experiment had to do with his food. Gandhi was determined to locate the right combination of diet that would keep his libido in check, more importantly, his involuntary nocturnal emissions. He would frequently go without salt or any kind of condiments in his food. There were also periods when he would have “unfired” food with olive oil, and instead of taking sugar he would substitute it with currants and dates. Gandhi was also a firm believer that onions and garlic were bad for a celibate. Thus, they were eliminated from his diet. Gandhi even found cow and buffalo's milk to be detrimental to his cause of celibacy. Clearly, food was an extremely serious business for him as he thought it was inextricably linked to one's carnal desires. As part of brahmacharya, he also fasted regularly. For Gandhi, fasting was not only a source of empowerment in his political struggles, but it also held special meaning for him since fasting afforded him the potential of attaining celibacy.

Many have written about Gandhi's experiments with women as part of his 'brahmacharya'. In his book, *Gandhi and His Women Associates*, Girija Kumar has provided a detailed account of Gandhi's physical contacts with women in his ashram. Young women from the ashram gave massages to Gandhi every day, followed by a bath, which was assisted by young women in the presence of a woman attendant. Girija Kumar reports: "On such occasions, Gandhiji would keep his eyes closed to save him embarrassment" (6). Gandhi's women associates also slept next or close to Gandhi. In 1946, he even asked his own 19-year-old grandniece, Manu Gandhi, to sleep with him in order to ensure that he was successful in controlling his libido. The fact that the participants were not comfortable with these experiments seems to have been overlooked. However, in Manu's diary, translated by Tridib Suhrud, she mentions Gandhi's solicitous care regarding her education and refers to Gandhi as "Bapu, my mother." (2019)

There are numerous instances of Gandhi's conflicted relations with his female associates, including Mirabehn or Madeline Slade(Kakar) and Sarala Debi Chaudhurani. Desire for control and tension marked many of these relationships and hint at a latent gender ambivalence. For Gandhi, 'brahmacharya' is the attainment of sexlessness, not impotence, the first being a state in which sexual energy is completely sublimated into spiritual energy. It is tempting to speculate that while impotence suggests a kind of lack of masculine vigour, sexlessness might signify a state of transcendence. So a lack is turned into a positive force, by removing from it any suggestion of failure.

### Embodying the Renunciate

When Mohandas Karamchand initially travelled to England in the 1880s, he was concerned about both social acceptance and wearing appropriate clothes, as befitting an aspiring lawyer/barrister. This was the concern that dictated his preferences and sartorial choices, right up to the time of his South African sojourn in the Transvaal. If we are to access Gandhi's photographs from the early part of his life in the last three decades of the nineteenth century till early 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can observe the changes in his appearance from conformity to rebellion, from sartorial elegance to a minimalistic renunciatory garb. It is tempting to speculate and forward the thesis that Gandhi's experiments with truth relate to his self and life, and the constant traffic of the two on his own terms, measures and initiatives that defined the man and made him a great and effective leader in the cause of India's independence. Through his innovative narrative of brahmacharya and performance as an ascetic, Gandhi was able to transform ascetic disciplines and vows of truth, non-violence, self-sacrifice, simplicity, and poverty into techniques of nonviolent activism. Veena Howard<sup>7</sup> discusses the religious texts that Gandhi selected and interpreted in order to synthesize an ideology of asceticism and activism in his career as a political leader.

A lot of this is recorded in his autobiography, where many details are related to his corporeal practices and focused sharply on his dietary practices, which is linked to his politics. In undertaking a cultural studies analysis of Gandhi's gastronomic practices and experiments, the link with politics transformed and imbued humble objects of everyday use with unique significance. Thus salt, caps charkhas (spinning wheel) were turned into objects with a unique significance and suffused with a symbolic value. Gandhi's experiment with truth extends to his diet, his intimate relations and close relationships and considers what it might mean for his politics. From diet, occupation and activities, self formation and character formation, sartorial choices to sexuality we see a conscious shift, moving him away from one kind of life, aspiration to another, till his life is devoted and subsumed into the course of India's history. As Parama Ray<sup>8</sup> points out in her detailed exploration of Gandhi's dietetics, food practices and the forging of a version of asceticism, "in reading his experiments in dietetics, the details of his vegetarianism, fasting and food asceticism



symptomatically, as it were” she realises the internal consistency and continuity of some of these practices and the gendered dynamics of vegetarianism (62-3). Moreover, these accounts can in turn “illuminate the intimate and unexpected links among meat-eating, modern formations of masculinity and a national-political aesthetics of the body (63).” In this analysis, Ray speculates that Gandhi’s friend in early youth, Sheikh Mehtab, who tempts him to have meat and alcohol, represents, like the bad angel (my simile) in the morality plays, a sort of rite of passage. This is a role in which Gandhi’s eldest son, Harilal, gets cast in later, when he converts and becomes a profligate. He (Harilal) is found in a comatose state shortly after Gandhi’s death and dies soon afterwards. Ray, following Erikson speculates that if Mehtab had not existed in actual life, Gandhi would have been forced to invent him. (68) She further speculates that Mehtab is that part of Gandhi’s psyche which has to be violently ejected for his ‘brahmacharya’ experiment to unfold and succeed (68).

If Sheikh Mehtab constitutes one milestone in Gandhi’s journey towards the forging or formation of an alternative masculinity, his Jewish friends whom he met in South Africa, like Hermann Kallenbach and Pollak, may be considered to be another. Both these personages and their extensive and intensive contact with Gandhi is narrated in his autobiography and their influence, particularly Kallenbach’s, was a vital one in shaping his ideas and developing the contours of a differential non-violent masculinity. The association with Kallenbach was vital to the Tolstoy Farm experiment that Gandhi put into practice in the Natal (Gandhi, *Autobiography* 248-284).

### **A Revolution Based on Truth**

Moreover, Gandhi’s evolution of ‘satyagraha’ literally meaning a revolution based on truth could be seen in the context of ascetic masculinity. Examining the close linkages between ‘satyagraha,’ and psychoanalysis, Erikson discusses how the teleology of truth directs both processes. In his seminal work on Gandhi, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson traces the unfolding of a “precocious and relentless conscience,” narrated in a confessional tell-all mode. He lays special stress on the way in which Gandhi’s nursing care of his ageing father, a civil servant whose health and career were both declining during his son’s youth, not only served to conceal the wish to replace the father but set the pattern “for a style of leadership which can defeat a superior adversary only non-violently” (Lasch p.1). He examines the effects on Gandhi of his “premature child marriage, which left him with a horror of sexuality” and guilt about his sexual drive, but which also made impossible the monastic retreat to which his developing religiosity might have led. In Gandhi’s case the quest for sainthood therefore had to take political form, and it in this context that he developed the idea of ‘Satyagraha’.

Erikson asserts that ‘Satyagraha’ represents “a better and more expeditious way of righting wrongs,” in Gandhi’s words, than other forms of political action. It seeks to cure men of the “righteous and fanatic moralism” that is the major source, in Erikson’s view, of irrational violence. Moreover, it is the only politics that instead of dividing men seeks to reconcile them (while at the same time pursuing revolutionary objectives) and thus contributes to the struggle for “more inclusive identities” — the sense of mankind as a single species instead of a collection of mutually hostile subspecies. It does this by recognizing the humanity of the adversary and by seeking to shame him rather than to exterminate him — for instance, by forcing him to act in ways inconsistent with his own ideals of decency and honour.

Gandhi’s programme for belief and action towards making a fresh and compelling case for “militant nonviolence” (Erikson, title) found many takers the world over. Gandhi himself wrote, in the aftermath of the Ahmedabad strike, that most of his followers had taken up nonviolence not from a consciousness of their own dignity and strength but “because they were too weak to undertake methods of violence.” For a time, he decided that “we shall not be fit for swaraj [home rule] till we have acquired the capacity to defend ourselves.”



What these reflections suggest is that the political choice lies not between violence and nonviolence but between “the disciplined use of violence”, free from fanatical and irrational behaviour of any kind. Erikson rules out the Western revolutionary tradition as an alternative to nonviolence, partly for the good reason that it has too easily allied itself with cold-blooded violence and terror, but partly because he mistakenly assumes that revolutions are invariably violent. In fact they tend to degenerate into irrational violence only when a self-chosen “vanguard” of professional revolutionaries tries to impose its will on the majority.

The next step in the process is the fashioning of the true revolutionary, who believes that this is his life’s work. In Gandhi’s case, this belief took the form of the demand that the true ‘Satyagrahi’ abstain from sexual relations. “A passive resister,” according to the Mahatma, “[...] can have no desire for progeny.” He reiterates the necessity of abjuring carnal lust and training the mind to forgo all luxuries (Gandhi 275).

What this means in practice is a leadership that has cut itself off from “generativity” and “householdership,” to use Erikson’s terms, and from all the daily concerns connected with the maintenance of life. For this reason it is essential, according to Erikson, that nonviolence no longer remain restricted to ascetics and practical saints; “for the danger of a riotous return to violence always remains at least latent if we do not succeed in imbuing essential daily experiences with a Satyagraha-of-everyday-life.”

It is not likely, however, that a politics in which an exalted ideal of personal heroism plays so large a role can ever become genuinely popular or, indeed, even ought to become popular. “Your duty,” Gandhi wrote to an unfaithful follower, “lay in honouring [your commitment to the movement], even if your entire family were to starve in consequence. “A movement that places such demands on its practitioners is obviously difficult, and even though it may attract a mass following among the weak and oppressed, that following can easily turn to irrational violence if its expectations are too rudely disappointed.

In asking for a Satyagraha-of-everyday-life, Gandhi was being politically astute. He was able to fill a crucial gap or address a weakness not only of the nonviolent tradition but of the socialist tradition as well — their common failure to root revolutionary action in the everyday maintenance of life (Lasch p.1) Many of Gandhi’s experimental attempts were to do with everyday living and its demands. He also attempted to make Kastur, his wife, understand the importance and dignity of all kinds of manual labour, including work that had been traditionally proscribed by Hindu/Brahmanical rules of purity and pollution. In his letters to Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, a fiercely independent nationalist who was also Tagore’s niece, he stresses the importance of physical work and manual labour.<sup>8</sup> (Forbes 79)

Ashish Nandy, in an essay on Gandhi referred to earlier, highlights the cultural significance and implications/ramifications of some of Gandhi’s political moves. He argues that Gandhi’s focus on the importance of work and labour, which had been traditionally been viewed as lowly, was a challenge both to Brahmanical hierarchies as well as to paradigms of masculinity, which followed from this Brahmanical “stratarchy” (Nandy 71–2) “Particularly dangerous to the traditional authority system was his negation of the concepts of masculinity implicit in some Indian traditions and in the colonial situation (Nandy 71). Citing critical work on Gandhi from a psychoanalytical perspective, he restates Gandhi’s “deep need to come to psychological terms with his mother by incorporating aspects of her femininity in his own personality” (73). Interestingly he also points out a latent ambivalence that he analyses is evident in Gandhi’s attitude to his mother (73). Further the “aggressive elements of this ambivalence were associated with some degree of guilt and search for valid personal and social models of atonement.” This last point, according to Nandy, is perhaps generalisable for the average Indian who has either “abnegated the feminine or glorified it out of all proportion” (73). The fear arises out of a view which sees woman as a symbol of “irrational nature and unpredictable culture.”

Finally, both Sanskritic and imperial culture derived its “strength from the identification of rulership with male dominance and subjecthood with feminine submissiveness.” (74) This is an equation rejected by Gandhi. He rejected the British as well as the Brahmanic-Kshatriya equation between manhood and dominance, between masculinity and legitimate violence and between femininity and passive submissiveness. He wanted to extend to the male identity-in both colonizer and colonized- the revalued, partly non-brahmanic equation between womanhood and non-intrusive, nurturant, non-manipulative, non-violent self de-emphasizing ‘merger’ with natural and social environments.(74)

In Book IV, Chapter 5, Gandhi also describes his journey into religious discovery. In this chapter of his autobiography, he writes: “Theosophist friends certainly intended to draw me into their society, but that was with a view to getting something from me as a Hindu. Theosophical literature is replete with Hindu influence, and so these friends expected that I should be helpful to them. I explained that my Sanskrit study was not much to speak of, that I had not read the Hindu scriptures in the original, and that even my acquaintance with the translations was of the slightest. But being believers in *samskara* (tendencies caused by previous births) and *punarjanma* (rebirth), they assumed that I should be able to render at least some help (Gandhi 220).

Realising the gaps in his knowledge, in the early years of this century, he starts reading Swami Vivekananda’s *Rajayoga* with some of these friends and M. N. Dvivedi’s *Rajayoga* with others. He also read Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* with one friend and the *Bhagavad Gita* with quite a number. As he narrates, “We formed a sort of Seekers’ Club where we had regular readings. I already had faith in the *Gita*, which had a fascination for me. Now I realized the necessity of diving deeper into it. I committed to memory thirteen chapters.” (221)

However, he continues, “the memorising of the *Gita* had to give way to other work and the creation and nurture of *Satyagraha*, which absorbed all my thinking time, as the latter may be said to be doing even now.”

“What effect this reading of the *Gita* had on my friends only they can say, but to me the *Gita* became an infallible guide of conduct. It became my dictionary of daily reference.” Comparing it to the lexicon I turned to this dictionary of conduct for a ready solution of all my troubles and trials. Words like *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *samabhava* (equability) gripped me. How to cultivate and preserve that equability was the question. How was one to divest oneself of all possessions? Was not the body itself possession enough? Were not wife and children possessions? (221)

He continues to describe his arrival and at and understanding of ideas of renunciation, self-abnegation and renunciation. He proceeds to outline his internal self-examination: “Further, was I to give up all I had and follow Him? Straight came the answer: I could not follow Him unless I gave up all I had.” (222) It was at this juncture that his knowledge of English law helps him find an answer:

My study of English law came to my help. Snell’s discussion of the maxims of Equity came to my memory. I understood more clearly in the light of the *Gita* teaching the implication of the word ‘trustee’. My regard for jurisprudence increased, I discovered in its religion. I understood the *Gita* teaching of non-possession to mean that those who desired salvation should act like the trustee who, though having control over great possessions, regards not an iota of them as his own. It became clear to me as daylight that non-possession and equability presupposed a change of heart, a change of attitude. I then wrote to Revashankarbai to allow the insurance policy to lapse and get whatever could be recovered, or else to regard the premiums already paid as lost, for I had become convinced that God, who created my wife and children as well as myself, would take care of them.

His decision leads to disturbed family relations, as he narrates: To my brother, who had been as father to me, I wrote explaining that I had given him all that I had saved up to that moment, but that henceforth he should expect nothing from me, for future savings, if

any, would be utilized for the benefit of the community. Perhaps needless to state, this move did not elicit a good response from his brother (222).

Gandhi's embodied practice of Brahmacharya was central to his non-violent method requiring a mass mobilisation. Many scholars have directed attention to how his practice of embodied renunciation permeated his politics and became a powerful instrument to influence diverse sets of people and groups divided by ethnicity, language and religion, that too in a society sharply stratified by sharp divisions of caste, class and gender. As Veena Howard, in her study of Gandhi's *Ascetic Activism* points out,

The austere practice of brahmacharya was an essential prerequisite for public service, and it was multi-layered, nuanced and imbued with ethical, religious, mythical, and cultural meanings, all of which allowed him to engage with social, political, gender, and religious issues. Second, through his embodied renunciation, he acquired the status of mahâtmâ ("great soul"), which became a central factor in mobilizing millions of Indians for action. In the Indian context, spiritual leadership has been and continues to be associated with 'brahmacharya'. Furthermore, Gandhi, drawing on the Hindu tradition that ascribes a supernatural value to brahmacharya, sought to validate the ascetic power of self-control and to transform it into an active power for nonviolent resistance. (Howard xii)

She also discusses how through "his personal vow and ethic of austerity, he was able to assert moral power and exemplify self-sacrifice and self-rule." Through his embodiment of a masculinity which was renunciatory, ascetic and non-violent, he was able to convey a "message of autonomy and moral power. mobilizing the masses to make sacrifices for India's independence". Moreover, through his innovative narrative of brahmacharya and performance as an ascetic and renunciate, "Gandhi was able to transform ascetic disciplines and vows of truth, nonviolence, self-sacrifice, simplicity, and poverty into techniques of nonviolent activism, including nonviolent resistance, non-cooperation, self-reliance, fearlessness, the willingness to go to jail, and maintaining commitment despite suffering" (Howard xii).

It is this journey that is detailed in his autobiography that he wrote in his mid-50s between 1926 and 1929, in Gujarati and which was translated mostly by Mahadev Desai, although some chapters were done by Pyarelal. Patterns of sin, guilt and redemption are evident and in fact highlighted and foregrounded by him, as in the episode of Sheikh Mehtab and particularly, his father's death. His sense of self-flagellating, punitive revulsion against the sexual impulse could be traced to that moment, as many critics and commentators have highlighted. That, and the vow to his mother, before leaving for England, ensured that his pursuit of truth would be incomplete, were he to deviate from his mother's injunctions and ignore the pricking of his conscience.

The sexual revolution, which ushered in the belief in the right to sexual satisfaction for women, altered the psychological landscape of sexuality for both men and women. Coming before the sexual revolution, Gandhi lived at a time when sex was viewed as marital duty and as a necessity for the production of children (Howard xiv). From Gandhi's writings, it is apparent that sexuality in his era fit the more stereotypical model of naturalised conjugal masculinity. For Gandhi, "the constant need for male sexual satisfaction could be viewed as aggressive and violent. It could be seen as an endangering women's lives due to the hazards of childbirth; an obstacle to their well-being; and an impediment to their fuller participation in society and emancipation". In this way, his experiments, says Howard, are exploring a kind of feminism." (Howard p.xiv-xv)

It is also important to understand the political challenge that he embodied to the colonial government through an understanding of political masculinities and his mobilization of his inner resources to develop a strong and effective voice against the policies of British rule. The lens provided by postcolonial theory in its conversation with life narrative is useful in this context: "Postcolonial theory, in displacing universalized subjectivities associated with Western thought, wants to emphasize how one (mode of) universalizing

subjectivity has always excluded other modes of subjectivity.” (Huddart 6) The drive or impulse in Gandhi’s autobiography and letters, I would argue, serves to displace the centralizing impulse of Western and bourgeois models of autobiography/life writing. His writings work towards a formulation of what might be termed an alternative version of masculinity, drawing from indigenous and religious discourses of ethical practice. His practice of self formation, self-development and self-documentation could be seen to be formulating the basis of the self which is outside the trajectories of the traditional self, outside the boundaries of the modern, secular, bourgeois self for which autobiographical writings of people like Rousseau, Franklin and others provide a template. Instead, his self-fashioning, both inwardly and outwardly, draws on the idea of the renunciate. Outwardly, he discards western garb as well the outer signs of class and caste identity. He also adopts minimalism in his garb and popularizes the idea of going without. So apart from non-vegetarian food, his dietary practices illustrate his experiments with raw and uncooked food and experimentation with food taxonomies, when he gives up several categories of food—sometimes lentils, cereals, vegetables.

In the conflation of issues of food and identity, Gandhi finds a way of bringing in the socio-cultural within the ambit of the subjective. His experiments could be seen as being a part of and partaking of a discourse of interiority, which is then politically and socially performed and enacted. The identity and subjectivity that he develops is of necessity, an audience oriented one. To understand this idea, one has to understand the essence and efficacy of martyrdom and that, martyrdom as a performance can only be effective when it draws the common people into its ambit. Gandhi’s public and much publicized fasts served to draw common people, irrespective of class and gender, into this magic circle of the ‘mahatma’ that transcended borders of region and language. Being a beneficiary as well as a proponent of proliferating print culture as well as the newly evolving aural and visual media, Gandhi was at once astute and shrewd in his mass mobilization of a rudderless people, who were reverential but undisciplined.

At a time when right-wing masculinities in its various configurations are in the ascendant, it is urgent and imperative to recuperate certain unique modalities in Gandhi’s experiments not only with truth, but also with masculinity. Eschewing imperial, militant models of masculinity, refusing the binary of colonial-colonized masculinities, including its dietary and sartorial choices, Gandhi forged a version of a postcolonial renunciative self which redefined the contours not only of constructed gender roles, but also the essence of personhood.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Chaudhurani, Sarala Debi, “Jibaner Jharapata” (The Scattered Leaves of my Life), pp. 95.

<sup>2</sup> See Forster, E. M. “Notes on the English Character”.

<sup>3</sup> See Nandy pg nos.

<sup>4</sup> Mrinalini Sinha’s book was one of the first full length studies of colonial masculinities, Indira Chowdhury’s *The Frail Hero and Virile History* was another.

<sup>5</sup> Chakraborty, 2011, brings in the question of ascetic masculinities, adding yet another dimension to colonial masculinities.

<sup>6</sup> See Suhrud's 'Introduction' to *The Diary of Manu Gandhi*.

<sup>7</sup> See Howard Preface, pp. xiv.

<sup>8</sup> See Ray pp. 62-91.

<sup>9</sup> See Forbes for Sarla Devi's letters, where Gandhi wrote to her, "Great and good though you are, you are not a complete woman without achieving the ability to do household work", pp. 79-80.

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# My Story of Us: A Comparative Analysis of Alberto Prunetti and Fan Yusu's Working-Class Life Writing

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**Abstract:** The present article analyses the life narratives of two contemporary working-class writers: Alberto Prunetti (Italy) and Fan Yusu (China). Both of them share similar creative, aesthetic and historical preoccupations, and engage with writing as an expressive form beyond mere commentary. With this in mind, the article investigates the relation between fiction and nonfiction in their work; parental figures as incarnations of their sensibilities towards history; and the main formal techniques and aesthetic strategies operative in their writing. By doing so, the article demonstrates the validity of a comparative perspective on working-class literatures today to better grasp pressing issues concerning the identities of labour globally.

**Keywords:** Autofiction, realism, working-class literature, Fan Yusu, Alberto Prunetti

On September 1, 2017, Alberto Prunetti, already an established author in Italy, wrote a programmatic article about his notion of “working-class writing.” In the piece, among the others, he cited Fan Yusu and her memoir, published only a few months earlier:

It is the story of a female migrant worker arrived in Beijing from the countryside, reported by [the Italian magazine] *Internazionale* on 12 May 2017. It is a short, beautiful tale, a memoir that brings together questions of class and gender[.] The prism of class juxtaposes to that of gender and ethnicity, which in turn do not erase the questions of class but rather polarize them, clarify and further delineate their contours. Fan Yusu's story is an extraordinary example of working-class writing.<sup>1</sup>

The memoir, “Wo shi Fan Yusu” (I Am Fan Yusu), was published online on April 25, 2017. The powerful (self-)representation of Fan's real-life story as a rural-to-urban migrant worker, particularly the oppression she suffered as a woman breaking tight gender conventions, and the vivid description of class inequalities rampant in Chinese society, rapidly intercepted a broad reading public. It went viral on the Chinese Internet and obtained considerable visibility abroad as well. It is notably the only Asian reference in Prunetti's article, otherwise replete with citations of working-class writers from Europe and the American continent. While China today presents a vast reality of literature produced by the new mobile laboring class that came into being following the economic reforms in the eighties, only recently has it begun to transgress the boundaries of academic scholarship in the world's western hemisphere.

Fan's sudden popularity and Prunetti's remarks can be ascribed to this growing interest. Two years later, Prunetti's attention was somewhat reciprocated. On November 9, 2019, during my fieldwork in Beijing, I gave a talk on Prunetti's work at the night reading class of the Picun Literature Group, a community of worker writers named after the Beijing peripheral neighborhood where it is based. It was the first time that Fan, a member of the group, learned of Prunetti's interest in her. Although the two have never met, and have actually read very little of each other, they have had a sort of brief intellectual dialogue. This fact, however trivial it may appear, actually encourages to unpack the points of commonality that can be identified in their writings, and to frame this effort in the pressing



questions of global working-class literature(s). More specifically, their life writing can be scrutinized in an effort to grasp the articulation of working-class identities today.

For the purposes of this study, I will refer to *working-class literature* as the specific body of works produced by individuals who are or have been part of the working class themselves. *Working class* is also a problematic term. While intellectual claims about the dissolution of the working class have proven to be groundless, it nevertheless may not seem the best-fitting term here, especially in the case of China, where the tremendous social changes brought about by four decades of economic reform have significantly transformed the role and composition of the laboring population, not to mention the apparent gulf that divides the highly subjectivized proletariat of the last century and the generally depoliticized cohort of migrant workers today. However, a classic Marxian postulate may be the best way out of the quandary: being not a class-for-itself, i.e. aware of their common class-based sociopolitical interests, does not prevent individuals from being objectively parts of a class-in-itself, i.e. brought together by their relation to the means of production. Such material condition is inevitably spotted by critical analysis of workers' writings, too. Far from suggesting that anything written by marginal(ized) groups has to be mechanically allegorical, I contend that the works under scrutiny explicitly or objectively address broader social questions beyond their individualities, bridging their personal stories with historical conditions of existence experienced by groups of individuals according to their position in society.

Considering Prunetti and Fan as working-class writers is also helpful to connect the discussion here with broader questions of global working-class literature(s)—and the fundamental question about what is *global* about it at all. At its most basic, working-class literature is the “representation of working-class life[,] always historically and geographically situated” (Nilsson and Lennon 40). It predates the international workers' movement as an organized force, and, in a way, survives its late-twentieth-century setbacks worldwide. The absence of international affiliations like those of the early twentieth century does not undermine its global connections. Scholars today, whether they consider national borders overcome (Perera) or stress the continued relevance of national comparisons (Lennon and Nilsson), almost unanimously acknowledge the centrality of a global perspective able to capture mutually influencing factors, shared concerns of style, form and subject-matter, resonances in the representation of the reality of globalized labor, and so forth. Life writing becomes particularly poignant here in its ability to connect the micro-stories of individuals to the grand issues—or narratives—of the working class today. Furthermore, life writing is a type of unmediated self-representation that turn authors from passive objects of inquiry or narration into actively speaking subjects.

Born in 1973 into a working-class family from a heavily industrialized area in Italy's central Tuscany region, Alberto Prunetti belongs to a generation grown up with the general abandonment of class politics and the liberalization of contracts, but with great access to higher education and to jobs outside the factory, however precarious. This background is always explicit in Prunetti's “working-class trilogy.” The first book, *Amianto* (*Asbestos*), 2012, is dedicated to his father, Renato Prunetti, who spent a lifetime as a factory worker; after retirement, he got lung cancer for his continued exposure to asbestos, eventually dying of it. The book alternates episodes from Renato's life as a worker, Alberto's memories of his childhood and his ailing father, and their family's struggle for justice. The generational shift already palpable in *Asbestos* becomes central in *108 metri* (*108 Meters*), 2018, which narrows down on Alberto's own life. Contrary to his father's industrial story, Alberto was part of the transnational precariat, migrated to Britain to pick up several menial jobs as a kitchen assistant, toilet-cleaner and handy-boy, and finally returned home to work as a translator. This second book is replete with conscious reflections on the

changing and transnational composition of labor, intergenerational dynamics in working-class families, deindustrialization and precarity. While these two books are dominated by Prunetti's relation with his father, the last novel, *Nel girone dei bestemmiatori* (*In the Circle of Blasphemers*), 2020, is addressed to his daughter, Elettra. A skillful parody of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, the pre-eminent classic of Italian literature, the story playfully summons episodes from Dante's *Inferno*, ancient mythology and pop references to represent the hidden class struggle that goes on in Hell mirroring that in the real world, supplemented by real-life anecdotes from Prunetti's family.

As observed by Baghetti, Prunetti's working-class trilogy successfully elaborates a counternarrative that reaffirms the social divide between exploiters and exploited, and proclaims the pride of belonging to the latter (99). The trilogy combines several genres, from (auto)biography to social inquiry, from archival reportage to fiction, moving more and more from the nonfictive of *Asbestos* to the increasingly imaginative, experimental and polyphonic of *108 Meters* and *In the Circle of Blasphemers*. In this combination of divergent forms, narration invariably maintains a direct relation with the author's lived experience, in a constant but productive tension between his life as an individual (and his working-class family), and the intention to thematize elements that make it part of the larger (hi)story of the working class.

Fan Yusu was also born in 1973, the same year as Prunetti. She comes from a poor rural area in China's central Hubei province, born into a peasant family. Although she could not complete formal education, she developed an ardent love for reading and writing since childhood, avidly going through literary magazines and masterpieces of Chinese as well as foreign literature. She moved to Beijing in the early nineties, joining the 90 million (today the number has risen to 285 million) migrant workers who left the countryside to look for work in the cities. She carried her two daughters along, and soon afterwards she left her abusive and alcoholic husband, becoming a single mother. She did several self-employed, low-income and precarious jobs, finally becoming a nanny for different upper-class families. After abandoning her literary passion for a while, she resumed it as she got in touch with a team providing assistance and services to migrant workers in the Beijing neighborhood of Picun, called Migrant Workers Home, and in 2014 she was among the starters of the aforementioned Picun Literature Group. Since then, she has published some short works of prose and poetry in the group's self-run outlets. She has mostly written nonfiction, documenting the lives of other precarious laborers she crossed after moving to Beijing in "Beipiao'men de rizi" (Days of "Northern Floaters"), or concentrating on the ordeals of children who either follow their migrating parents or are left behind without proper care in poems such as "Yi ge nongmingong muqin de zibai" (Confessions of a Migrant Mother), with a strong sensitivity towards gender imbalance and the weight of tradition, particularly elaborated in her short essay "Mingzi" (Names).

"I Am Fan Yusu," her famous memoir, retraces Fan's life from early childhood to the present. A considerable part is devoted to her family, her upbringing in the dire conditions of the countryside, and her mother's centrality in the family's life. In sections following Fan's transfer to Beijing, the story dwells on the conditions of the peripheric neighborhoods where migrants tend to concentrate, with a focus on migrant children, often left alone by their working parents and without proper education, since they cannot access official public schools due to the lack of an urban household registration. Fan worries that they will be denied emancipation from a destiny that apparently dooms them to the assembly line. By contrast, she exposes the inequality of the city's social world by describing what she sees on her job at the house of a tycoon's "concubine." The story is pervaded by a lingering sense of fatalism, although Fan finds some hope in new affective networks of solidarity forged in the city among the downtrodden.

Both lives share a context characterized by the extreme fragmentation of labor and individualization of laborers. The generational change from a “traditional” organization of factory labor coupled with an awareness of class belonging to migrant, deregulated jobs is lucidly depicted in Prunetti’s trilogy. Strikingly mirroring this situation, Fan embodies the post-seventies reality of rural-to-urban migrant workers in China, more befittingly termed “new workers” by activists. They are generally found doing menial, low-regulated or even informal jobs in key sectors of China’s labor-intensive industrial and service sectors. What makes Chinese “new workers” different from the “old” is the lack of a strong political subjectivity on the one hand and the absence of state welfare provisions on the other. Incidentally, Prunetti also prefers using the English word for *working class*, instead of the Italian equivalent, to acknowledge that the mass of exploited laborers has become immensely diversified also beyond the typical industrial assembly line.

Inserted in this context, Fan and Prunetti both appear committed to finding adequate forms of representation for telling their own life story, and its link to their larger social groups. Such a common effort forms the ground for comparative considerations. The point here is not to compare elements of their lives as they emerge from the narratives; rather, a global approach is fruitful and thought-provoking when applied to the modes of representation, to the way they connect (or disconnect) individual lives and social collectives, and the aesthetic challenges that emerge in so doing, capturing both local specificities and global articulations.

Real-life experience is central in life stories in general, but it acquires particular discursive relevance in working-class life writing. It is a common assumption that stories written directly by members of the working class tend to reflect reality and convey the genuine voices of individuals whose social existence would otherwise remain invisible. Such authenticity is often understood as coming at the expense of fictionality. While writers from other social backgrounds can easily write about working-class themes, that remains *fiction*, or investigative reportage at most. Stories written by workers themselves are supposed to be mimetic, reflecting reality as it is, and nonfictional as a consequence. However, nonfictional rigidity does not necessarily have to be the price for a life narrative’s authenticity. On the contrary, life writing can be supplemented by elements of non-referential fiction for several reasons, be them stressing certain points that need the fictional creation of situations, characters and events, evading pure mimesis, acquiring more literary legitimacy, and so on. Prunetti is straightforward about his use of *ofa fai* fiction since the very first lines of *Asbestos*:

I would have wished this story had never happened for real. How do they say? A product of the author’s fantasy. Instead, it was reality that came knocking at the door of these pages. Imagination filled the holes [of memory] like low-quality plaster and redrew some episodes to reproduce in a better way the story of a life and a death. Of a worker’s biography. (15)

Although he makes an explicit mention of biography, assumed to be based on pure facts, the author also claims to have made fair use of fictional elements. With technical vocabulary that comes directly from the world of factory (we find low-quality plaster there, but similar metaphors are used frequently throughout the text), fiction is presented as a viable solution to memory holes, but also a valuable tool to re-elaborate some parts of the real story and make them more meaningful or more coherent with the economy of narration. Other techniques include mixing up several real-life characters into one composite character by fusing their personal traits and stories. For these reasons, biography, although openly evoked, is not the most rigorous definition here. In fact, Prunetti considers the traditional novel form outdated and bourgeois, and concentrates his aesthetic effort in producing a “hybrid writing” between fiction and nonfiction, able to bridge real-life experience, sociological inquiry and political utterance. In a 2019 interview, Prunetti

acknowledged an interest in biofiction. Riccardo Castellana, refuting the thesis that biofiction is a purely postmodern genre (with which, Castellana argues, it only shares some formal traits, but not the ideology), suggests grouping under the category of biofiction works of literature that deal with a real person distinct from the author, where the fictional element is both thematic (the author does not have to observe full documentary fidelity) and formal (by adopting resources that are typical of fiction). In fact, Prunetti's later works tend to adapt more to the modes of autofiction, where the productive mixture of factuality and invention is maintained, but with the merging of author, narrator and protagonist. In contrast with the truthfulness guaranteed by the autobiographical pact, but in line with the biofictional approach, the reading of autofiction is also governed "not [by] the frame of actuality, but [by] that of relevance" (Srikanth 347). In short, Prunetti makes creative use of the possibilities offered by fiction to supplement an otherwise nonfictional account. His participatory and often intradiegetic narration aims at maintaining the factual accuracy of real-life experience, but refuses to be handtied by absolute fidelity to it when needed to further increase the politicization of his writing. Telling a story is not the sole goal of Prunetti's works. Political persuasion is central, and the narrator's partisanship is transparent.

Fan, on her part, has never produced such an extensive metadiscourse. Her memoir, however, must be placed in the discursive context of the "golden age" of China's nonfiction (*feixugou*). As a genre, nonfiction has become highly fashionable in China since the early noughties, in part as an offspring of the previous tradition of reportage literature, expurgated of its political sensitivity to leave only social inquiry (cf. Laughlin). According to Li Yunlei, contemporary nonfiction heals the rift between literature and society created in the eighties and nineties, and relies on the author's experience and personal investment. As a result, this form of nonfiction is eminently individual, in contrast with older reportage literature's commitment to prominent social causes (208). Nevertheless, direct experience as organized and conveyed by nonfiction is also an "active effort to enter [and] to understand" the social world (204). As a result, nonfiction has been actively promoted within and by the Picun Literature Group, with some of its members also winning awards for nonfictional writing based on their personal stories. It is not surprising, then, that "I Am Fan Yusu" concentrates exclusively on factual events and individuals, showing no interest in fictional integrations to the narration of real life. In this sense, "I Am Fan Yusu" is more akin to the genre of the thoroughly nonfictional memoir. Nevertheless, Fan also displays an attempt to evade the dullness of a plain recollection of facts:

My life is a book too hard to read, so clumsily has fate bound me.

I come from Xiangyang, Hubei province. At 12, I started doing private teaching at the village school. Had I not left my hometown and continued teaching, I would have become a proper teacher.

But I could not stand those dry days spent like the frog looking at the sky from the bottom of the well. So I came to Beijing. I wanted to see the world. I was 20 back then.

The lines above form the memoir's incipit. The retrospective gaze and the biographical information invite the reader to expect a piece of nonfiction, and do not contain any metatextual musing on the story's genre. Likewise lacking is any programmatic proclamation of the author's social identity as a migrant-/new worker (as opposed to Prunetti's subtle generalization of his father's story through the line "Of a worker's biography"). Instead, it conveys a strong sense of unique individuality, stemming from the claim of agency that underpins Fan's motivation to leave the countryside "to see the world." At the same time, the images of the book and fate are summoned. The choice of "a book too hard to read" as a depiction of her life not only anticipates the manifold hardships that Fan has had to go through, but does so by announcing her passion for

literature, of which she has been an avid reader since childhood. References to her fondness for reading recur throughout the memoir, first to highlight her pursuit of culture despite the poor conditions of her upbringing, then to motivate her effort to educate her own daughters despite their impossibility to access the official public school system in Beijing due to their lack of an urban residence registration. Later on, she uses the same image again: "A book never read by anyone is sad to see, like a person who has never lived decently." Implicitly, this statement also becomes an invitation to read her story, the "book too hard to read," highlighting the power of life narrative to bring out the existence of social realities otherwise marginalized or silenced. Fate, the mysterious force that has "so clumsily [...] bound" the book of Fan's life, appears then as the (de)materialization of structural features (inequality, exploitation, bureaucratic exclusion) at the root of her ordeals. As opposed to most of the nonfictional material produced by the Picun Literature Group, Fan's elaboration of her own peculiar imagery reveals her intention to break out of frigid factography in order to be taken seriously also in strictly literary terms. Another point in this direction is her freedom from strict adherence to linear plot development, displaced by a progression based on the thematic relevance assigned to certain matters (her family of origin, Picun, her job, her daughters' lives as migrant children). This effort can be further understood by keeping into consideration the fact that a large portion of scholarship and critique in China approaches the prose and poetry written by migrant workers only as a form of social commentary, valid in its ethnographic relevance, but fundamentally lacking in aesthetic quality (Sun 1005, van Crevel 275).

Under such circumstances, another parallel can be drawn regarding the role played by parental figures in Prunetti and Fan's lives, and in particular the narrative functions they take up in their life stories. Approaching it as a constant narrative element in Italy's "labor literature," Baghetti points out that "the death of the father" metaphorically symbolizes the crisis of the values held by the older generation of workers following the setbacks of the organized labor movement, the erasure of many of its accomplishments, and the "crisis of ideologies" (20–21). This outline resonates especially with Prunetti. His father is a constant presence in his stories: in addition to *Asbestos*, focused on his life, he is a constant presence in *108 Meters*, somewhat mixing up with the author's hometown, now a deindustrialized barren land, the man and the land both epitomes of a barely recognizable personal and collective past (*In the Circle of Blasphemers* has him performing the role of the poet Virgil, Dante's spiritual guide through Hell and Purgatory in the *Divine Comedy*). Baghetti wonders about the legacy passed by the father onto the son, and links the objects left to Prunetti by his dying father, listed in detailed in *Asbestos*, to a faded political past (the three-volume history of the Italian Communist Party by Paolo Spriano, an Italian-Russian dictionary), a lost condition of material wellbeing (a car), and mass culture (music records and comic strips). However, Prunetti also receives the tools and utensils from his father's jobs, as material symbols of class history and, as further elaborated in *108 Meters*, class loyalty. In fact, *108 Meters*, where the aspect of intergenerational relations is particularly stressed in all its sociopolitical implications, features a dialogue between the author and his father, with the latter saying:

Dunno. You can always leave. I stay and drink red wine to the health of those who leave, because they all leave, to go to London or Berlin or Barcelona or Paris, and I say, fine, take your trains and flee, go abroad, away from this Italy that is falling apart. But I also say: remember that as you go, tu-tum, tu-tum, tu-tum, at every 108 meters of your escape you'll step on a rail built by workers of the Piombino steelworks, the best rail smelters in the world, and if you now can flee on these bloody super-fast trains that's only because your dads threw minerals and coke into the blast furnace with the right dose of oxygen and technical gas and molded the steel and polished it by the book, and let's hope that these rails that are now carrying you away will bring you back home one day, and that you'll find us



still alive to hug you back. Can you smell billets and wire rods on our skin? Can you? Iron has pierced through our pores. We've been the rails that let you run a lifetime, when you were kids. At least, may the fruit of our labor take you away from this dull sky. (122–123)

The injunction to remain faithful to social origins and to eventually return to them is part of the legacy left by Prunetti's father. In a way, the very practice of life writing to salvage a particular working-class story from oblivion in order to speak of the "universal" (hi)story of the working class is a way to heed the call. In *the Circle of Blasphemers* and the effort to pass the awareness of social origins and class history onto the next generation, incarnated by Prunetti's daughter, is a prosecution of this effort in anticipation of another generational shift. In passing, the technical vocabulary and the language of iron and steel widely employed by Prunetti in his oeuvre, which emerge clearly from the passage cited above, are similarly used by many contemporary worker authors in China.

The parental figure is a symbol of class continuity for Prunetti. The opposite is true in Fan's case. Her mother, a central figure in "I Am Fan Yusu," represents class change. Growing up and "joining society" (as the Chinese phrase goes) before the high tides of rural-urban migration of the eighties and nineties, Fan's mother never had any industrial or urban job, spending her whole lifetime doing farm work. Her vigorous character and strong personality and the respect she enjoys among townsfolk are frequently highlighted throughout the text, and regarded as elements that underpin her role as the family's pillar. In the substantial absence of her husband, Fan's mother is introduced as the one who always looked after her five children, unperturbably taking care of their health problems despite the financial burden, or stepping in to help their lack of social performativity, like when her oldest son is mocked by the village because of his delusion about becoming a writer and struggles to find a wife. Notably, Fan's mother is also the only family member to back her up after she is scorned by the rest of the family for venturing out to the city on her own and coming back after leaving her abusive husband. Similar to the historical significance acquired by Prunetti's father's role, the example of Fan's mother assumes social power when the same characteristics of solidarity and mutual help, considered key aspects of the rural tradition as opposed to the anomie and atomization experienced in urban contexts, are reemployed in the city as well. After an invective about inequality in the city, the plight of migrant workers and their children, and the narration of her own life's hardships, Fan goes back to her admiration for her mother, who, despite being in her eighties, still takes the lead in a protest to defend the village's land from being grabbed to make room for a high-speed railway. In the closing lines of "I Am Fan Yusu," the creation of interpersonal relations based on empathy and mutual help as a viable form of solidarity among the subalterns of the city is presented as the spiritual heritage passed on by Fan's mother, as well as Fan's way to reciprocate her love:

What can I do for my mother? [...] I would think: is it not that people bully those weaker than them so they can get psychological pleasure? Or does it have perhaps to do with gene reproduction? From that moment on, I have had an idea: every time I meet a person weaker than me, I will pass love and respect onto them.

One can always do a little something when living, right? I am incompetent and so terribly poor, but there's still something I can do!

On the streets of Beijing, I hug every deformed wanderer, every sufferer from mental illnesses. I use my hugs to pass on motherly love, to return motherly love.

Although arguably more akin to a humanist ethos than class politics, this approach can also be interpreted as promoting practices of mutual aid to fill severe state welfare insufficiencies and build solidarity. Such solidarity appears based on individual action, although, outside of the text, Fan's commitment to the Picun Literature Group and the group's participation in the activity of the Picun's service-providing team known as Migrant



Workers Home reveal the importance of collective practice. Furthermore, solidarity appears directed not only to migrant workers specifically, but to the poor in general, identified as a loose social group in which Fan frames her own life story. The difference with the exchange between the Prunetti father and son is evident. Here, the translation of an ostensibly "rural" morality, passed on by a peasant mother, into the social space of a migrant worker in the city is also motivated by the fact that migrant workers of today are generally born to peasant families, and while many of their parents may have migrated to cities themselves for work during the eighties and nineties, their goal was to eventually return home. Many would still consider themselves peasants, not urban workers. In addition, migrant workers' rural origin still separates them from "traditional" workers of state-owned factories, and, most importantly, from the historical memory of the working class. While working in the factory sometimes brings migrant workers to identify with the history of the "older" working class, this identification is way less immediate for a domestic like Fan. Hers is also the transition from a peasant class background into an urban working-class environment.

Finally, the enormous transformations occurred in the composition and nature of the working class find a reflection in the narrative choices employed by the authors under survey here. Both, either explicitly or implicitly, are more or less outside of the conventional styles of literary representations of the working class, chiefly realism. On several occasions, Prunetti has openly lambasted plain realism, and he stated in the aforementioned interview that "Mimesis makes one blind" (295). As already mentioned, he has never claimed any exclusive commitment to nonfiction. However, he also created highly unreal or even absurd situations to convey the emotions and psychology of his characters, including himself. *In the Circle of Blasphemers* is obviously built on imagination, but there are other, more ambiguous instances. *108 Meters*, a fairly realist novel, brings in supernatural elements like the ghost of Margaret Thatcher, constantly haunting the protagonist, and Lovecraftian horrors: Prunetti locates the elusive manager in a mysterious villa on top of a hill, Cthul Manor, and he makes only a brief, ghastly appearance towards the end of the novel as "the silhouette of a strange figure, perhaps with an octopus-like head" (101), clearly remindful of Cthulhu. The result is not a total divorce from realism, let alone reality. Instead, it is an experiment that originates from the acknowledgement that psychology and emotions, like fear and incredulity, are also real and have material consequences. Emotional accuracy is a crucial component of Prunetti's life writing, and unreal elements appear more fitting to convey how the reality of oppression is experienced on the level of feelings, and therefore felt as absurd, nightmarish, and even hallucinatory.

"I Am Fan Yusu" does not step out of the domain of realism. While it is undeniable that realism still holds considerable symbolic authority in creative writing that purports to describe social life in China, it is also evidently considered a reasonable means to do so, possibly also as a reaction to so-called "pure literature." Despite this commitment to a faithful representation of reality, Fan comments that "art originates from life, and life today is absurd." This declaration cannot be entirely assimilable to a realist standpoint, because it naturally compels to admit that art cannot be entirely logical and rational if it wants to represent the absurdity of life. On the whole, however, Fan does not really follow up on this. She creates an "absurd" depiction of the extravagant way of life of the new urban bourgeoisie, comparing it to living in a historical drama set "in the golden age of the Tang or Qing dynasty, rather than in socialist New China," but, while poignant in its social critique, it is not systematic, nor does it govern the narration overall. The continued validity attributed to a mainly realist style is coupled with a propensity not to feel confined to its boundaries and therefore hybridize the forms of writing.

In conclusion, the main point emerging from the analysis above consists in the validity of an approach that considers life writing by subaltern or marginalized groups not just a

body of personal memories, but also collective accounts. Life narratives reveal stories otherwise buried, invisible in the mainstream discourse, or stereotyped in other forms of storytelling done by authors with different backgrounds. Yet, life writing should not be addressed as purely ethnographic material. On the contrary, it should be taken in full literary terms, considered not just as a faithful account of reality, but above all as a discourse on that reality. Analyzing the non-mimetic and non-referential in life narratives is therefore key to unpacking their potentiality in providing alternative perspectives on presents, pasts, and possibly futures, rather than just “views from below.” Both aspects—the referential and the non-referential—are there, and only keeping them both into account will give a complete picture of why life writing is socially and culturally meaningful. Political commitment is one of the foremost differences in Prunetti and Fan’s stories: while it is unequivocal and operative in the former, guiding aesthetic choices as well as the metanarrative, it is absent or only consequential in the latter, where oppression is experienced more as personal misfortune than a system, or clouded behind an adverse fate. Having clear political purposes in mind makes Prunetti more spot-on in his critique, while Fan is more focused on factual immediacy, which does not prevent her from making important remarks about general issues. In both cases, however, life writing is counter-hegemonic, uncovering the dark corners of history and advancing narratives alternative to the dominant or mainstream.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All English translations from Chinese and Italian sources have been made by the author of this essay.

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# Renegotiating Narrative Coherence: Édouard Louis' Autobiographical Novel *History of Violence* as "Multidirectional Testimony" of Sexual Trauma

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**Abstract:** The autobiographical 2016 novel *History of Violence* by the French author Édouard Louis is commonly read as a personal trauma narrative, as it recounts an experience of sexual violence the author has had and seeks to reestablish his self, which was left shattered by this very experience. Yet, in one of its main scenes, the novel stages how one of the conventions for personal trauma narratives, i.e. narrative coherence, precisely prohibits the reestablishment of narrator Édouard's self. This article investigates how *History of Violence*, especially through its digressive set-up, renegotiates the coherence norm for personal trauma narratives. It considers how this set-up exposes the racial and sexual lines along which conventional, coherent trauma narratives are elaborated, and coins and explores a new concept for the type of trauma narrative that it considers *History of Violence* to be instead: a multidirectional testimony of personal trauma.

**Keywords:** Multidirectional testimony, trauma narrative, sexual violence, narrative coherence

## Introduction

"[The doctor] didn't ask many questions, for which I was grateful. She said that what I'd gone through was like a kind of death." (Louis 117) After having become a victim of murderous sexual assault, Édouard, the narrator of Édouard Louis' 2016 autobiographical novel *Histoire de la violence*, translated to the English as *History of Violence*, talks to a doctor in the hospital who, speaking softly "as if it might shatter me if she raised her voice", tells him what impact an experience like his often has on victims: in a way, such victims, even if they survive, are left feeling they were killed. Édouard indeed feels death-like, a feeling that is typical for victims of murderous sexual assault who suffer from a shattered sense of self (Brison xi). As *History of Violence* recounts the night of the assault and its aftermath, the novel is commonly read as a literary testimony to this traumatic experience, and, because of the assault's self-depriving impact, as a personal trauma narrative with a very specific goal: to re-establish the self of the assaultee (Mueller 166; Dancus 13).

Yet, *History of Violence* does not live up to some of the writing conventions for successful personal trauma narratives. For one, the novel is set up as a frame story in which Édouard's sister is the one recounting the happenings during the night of the assault, which contradicts the need for assaultees to regain the subject position in their trauma story (Brison 68) – an issue I will address elsewhere. Another profound way in which the novel challenges personal trauma narrative conventions is through its many digressions. By recounting the story of their assault in a non-chronological order with many digressions assaultees are thought to run a risk. This risk is, in fact, a theme in *History of Violence*: in the scene that recounts how Édouard testifies to his assault at the police station, the officers refuse to listen to his story if he does not stop telling it his "completely anarchic way" and starts to "[t]ell it in the order that it happened" (Louis 33, emphasis in original). Indeed, if victims of sexual assault want their trauma story to be believed and taken seriously, they should tell it in a specific way, and this specific way involves coherence (Roeder 21; Borg 453; *Tainted Witness* 54).

What I want to do in this article is explore the scene just mentioned, as well as two of the digressions that characterize the novel’s set-up, to reconstruct how *History of Violence* renegotiates the coherence convention for personal trauma narratives. What we will see is how this scene stages the specific reasons why the coherence convention does not allow but rather prohibits the assaultee in question to reestablish his self: the narrative marked by the authorities as coherent and thus convincing turns out to be laced with both sexist and racist tropes and therefore represses in instead of expresses aspects of Édouard’s self. What I will do first, is give some more theoretical cachet to the claim that sexual trauma ‘kills’ assaultees in the sense that it bereaves them of their sense of self and that personal trauma narratives are key in reestablishing this self. Then, I will zoom in on the testimonial scene at the police station and reconstruct how it stages the intertwining of coherence as a convention (or even: norm) for trauma narratives and sexist and racist tropes. Eventually, I will have a look at two digressions, exploring how they renegotiate the discriminatory coherence convention for trauma narratives, after which I will suggest that *History of Violence* takes the shape of what I, referring to the concept as introduced by Holocaust historian Michael Rothberg, will dub a *multidirectional testimony*.

### 1. Piecing together a shattered self

The consequences of sexual assault for a victim’s self or identity were theorized thoroughly in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* by philosophy professor Susan Brison. The direct motivation for the book was the fact that Brison herself had become a victim of sexual violence and attempted murder, a gruesome episode that functions as guidance throughout her text. One of the book’s main concerns is the experience Brison had during the assault’s aftermath: the experience of the attacker not only having attempted but succeeded to kill her: “For months after my assault, I had to stop myself before saying (what seemed accurate at the time): ‘I was murdered in France last summer.’” (Brison xi)

As Brison theorizes, a victim of murderous sexual assault is left dead even if they survive: such an assault causes a victim to no longer feel like they live and naturally belong in their surrounding world. Referring to *Trauma and Recovery* by the psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman, Brison explains that victims lose their belief that it is possible to be themselves around others in their social surroundings. This, according to Brison, indicates that it is nothing less than the victim’s self that is shattered by sexual violence. Yet, the very assumption that someone’s self can be undone by a violent encounter with another human being implies that their self can be reestablished in relation to others as well: “In this book, [...] I develop and defend a view of the self as fundamentally relational – capable of being undone by violence, but also of being remade in connection with others.” (Brison xi)

The narrator in *History of Violence*, Édouard, indeed attests to a lost belief in the possibility of being able to be oneself in his social surroundings: “[E]ver since I faced my own death that night with Reda, I’ve been afraid of not believing, of not believing in anything anymore, and of replacing the absurdities of my own life with other absurdities.” (Louis 24) What occurred exactly during that night with Reda, we learn in the course of the novel. As already mentioned, the novel is set up as a frame story: Édouard overhears his sister recounting his traumatic episode to her husband and supplements it with his own internal commentary. It is through this semi-dialogical set-up that we gradually find out about the events. After a dinner party on Christmas Eve, Édouard walks home and runs into a man whom he initially ignores. After having talked for a while, Édouard invites the man home, where they make love. During the night, the two have a collision and by daybreak, after Reda has fled the house, Édouard finds himself having become the victim of theft, extreme sexual violence, and attempted murder.

The remaining part of *History of Violence* recounts Édouard going to the hospital and, after his friends had convinced him to do so, to the police station to report the assault. We learn that in the months after the assault, Édouard lived on without feeling either alive or feeling to be an actual person, a self. Following Brison, however, we can assume that selves, shattered by sexual violence, can in fact be remade. Theorizing the remaking of shattered selves, Brison refers to psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who claims that in the process of remaking a self, “telling is crucial” (Brison 59). According to Laub, trauma is precisely that type of experience that has not occurred before and that therefore cannot be processed. To enable oneself to process a traumatic event, one has to order it, mold it into a narrative: “Piecing together a shattered self requires a process of remembering and ‘working through’ in which speech and affect converge in a trauma narrative.” (Brison x)

What, according to Brison, happens when one molds one’s traumatic experience into a trauma narrative, are two crucial things. Since an experience with sexual assault shatters your sense of self, i.e. your feeling of naturally taking up a specific position in life among others, you are in need of regaining that position if you want to reestablish your self. The regaining of this position, according to Brison, happens when you recount your trauma story: you reclaim the subject position in your own life story that was taken from you when you were forced to be a mere object to your perpetrator (68). The second crucial effect of recounting one’s personal trauma narrative is making other people witnesses to the story. Making others witnesses to your story, in case these others act as good enough listeners, in fact reestablishes your relationships with them: you regain your sense of naturally taking up a specific place in your social surroundings (Brison 68).

Yet, for these two crucial things to happen, a trauma narrative typically has to take on a certain shape. That is to say: there are certain conventions that the narrative should live up to for the intended effects to occur. As already touched upon in the above, one of these conventions is narrative coherence. Narrative coherence as a convention for trauma stories is recommended in both therapeutic and legal contexts. In therapeutic contexts, regaining the subject position in one’s own life story is thought to be dependent on one’s ability to recount this story coherently, as many personal trauma narratives about sexual assault emphasize the value of control and stability, proliferated by the coherence of a narrative (Borg 455). In the legal context, it is the other of the two crucial effects of narrativizing a traumatic experience that is mainly at play: making others witnesses to your trauma story. Especially in the legal context, as already mentioned, it is important for these witnesses to rely on the truthfulness of your story. And indeed, witnesses are more likely to do so in case your trauma story is narrated coherently (again, cf. Roeder 21; Borg 453; *Tainted Witness* 54).

## 2. A testimonial scene: discriminatory aspects of coherence

Yet, one may ask oneself which particular narratives count as coherent, as well as which subjects are able to (relatively) smoothly operate norms such as coherence. The even more pressing question is: which subjects may *not* be able to operate them, resulting in their trauma narratives not being believed or valued. According to Lauren Berlant, not all conventions function as norms, but under specific circumstances, conventions can in fact be made the norm, implying in our case that coherent trauma narratives become favored over stories that are considered less or non-coherent (Berlant and Prosser 181). Indeed, as Borg maintains, “narrative coherence has been used ideologically to legitimise certain narratives while excluding from the canon other narratives, by women or slaves, for example, that do not fit hegemonic narrative structures” (458).

Borg goes on to emphasize that the ideal of a reestablished coherent self, coming about in and through a coherent personal trauma narrative, may in fact be “a cultural construc-



tion and an effect of gendered and racialized discourses and practices” (Hyvärinen et al. 7, as quoted in Borg 458). What I want to explore in this paragraph is how *History of Violence* exposes some of the specific ways in which the coherence convention for trauma narratives is indeed an effect of such gendered and racialized discourses and practices. To do so, I want to turn to the already mentioned scene in the novel that stages Édouard testifying to his assault at the police station, where the officers impose coherence as a norm for trauma narratives on him explicitly. By exploring this scene, I want to detangle the way it stages how the coherence convention privileges certain subjects over others along both gendered and racialized lines.

Let us begin with the aftermath of the scene at the police station that we want to zoom in on. In a later chapter, Édouard reflects upon the scene’s impact:

I no longer recognized what I was saying. I no longer recognized my own memories, when I spoke them out loud; the questions I was being asked by the police made me describe my night with Reda differently than I’d have chosen, and in the form that they imposed on my account, I no longer recognized the outlines of my own experience, I was lost, I knew that once I went forward with the story, according to their cues and directions, I couldn’t take it back, and I’d have lost what I wanted to say; [...] (Louis 57).

In this passage, the narrator of *History of Violence*, Édouard, gives expression to the implications of the events at the police station. Indeed, he feels the officers imposed a specific form on his testimony, a form he feels did not do justice to his experience at all. This form, as we already learned, was in fact a coherent one – and what the officers understood by ‘coherent’ exactly is cleared up in the scene that describes Édouard being interviewed about his assault at the police office.

While Édouard recounts the events of the traumatizing night to two officers at the police station, one of the officers interrupts him: “Stop right there!” (Louis 49) She tells him she is frustrated about the messy way the testimony is evolving and requests him to recount the events of the night chronologically and without digressing. Yet, what happened just before the interruption gives us insight into the specifics of the form that the police impose on Édouard’s story. The moment before the interruption, Édouard was replying to a leading question that the other officer had asked him after he recounted the part of his story where he invited Reda home: “Wait – you brought a stranger up to your apartment, in the middle of the night?” (Louis 48) Édouard not being conscious right away of being victim-blamed by his interviewer answers: “But everyone does that...”, to which the officer replies sarcastically: “Everybody?”

Édouard then explains to the reader: “It wasn’t a question. Obviously, he wasn’t asking me whether or not everybody did that, he was saying nobody did that. Or at least, not everybody. So finally I answered: ‘What I mean is, people like me...’” (Louis 48) What the officer insinuates in this passage, is that he understands Édouard to be at least partially to blame for his assault, and for a very specific reason: for being part of the gay scene in which, according to the world view of the officer, dangerous behavior, such as inviting strangers home in the middle of the night, is normalized. By asking his leading questions, the officer requests Édouard to mold the story of his assault in a form that he, the officer, takes to be coherent; a story in which Édouard takes part of the blame for his assault because of his sexual identity. In this way, the testimonial scene stages how coherence as a norm, imposed on Édouard by the officials, has distinctly sexist implications. Indeed, a police officer suggesting that the behavior related to your sexual identity is to blame for the violence being done to you has a similar effect as victim-blaming women for sexual violence inflicted on them, as Brison explains it: “The fear of rape has long functioned to keep women in their place.” (Brison 18)

The leading questions of the officer are not the only markers of the ways in which the discourse imposed on Édouard is gendered and racialized. Another sign is introduced early in the novel. There, Édouard thinks of the police report that was drawn up after the interview and how it described his perpetrator: as an ‘Arab male’ (Louis 13). This description, we learn later in the book, does not at all echo the actual description that Édouard gave of Reda during the interview. Édouard then explains to the reader that while he was giving the description, one of the officers interrupted him, in a way similar to when he was posing the leading questions, and imposed on him a specific way of telling his story: “At the police station I’d given a brief description of Reda, when they asked, and immediately the officer on duty cut me off: ‘Oh, you mean he was an Arab.’ He was triumphant, *delighted* would be an exaggeration, but he did smile, he crowed; it was as if I’d given him the confession he’d wanted to hear since I walked in the door, as if I’d given him proof that he was right all along; he kept repeating it, ‘the Arab male, the Arab male’, every other sentence involved ‘Arab male’” (Louis 13–14).

Reda, we learn, is not an Arabic but a Kabyle man. In the discourse of the police officers, however, this difference has no place. Their idea of a coherent narrative about becoming a victim of sexual violence indeed involves racist tropes like generalizing all men with a certain physical appearance, which fills Édouard with anger: “The copy of the report that I keep at home, drafted in police language, refers to an *Arab male*. Each time I see that phrase it infuriates me, because I can still hear the racism of the police who interviewed me [...]” (Louis 17) As staged in the scene at the police station, what the officials understand to be a coherent version of Édouard’s trauma story, i.e. the version that ends up in the official report, is a version that lays part of the blame of the assault on Édouard’s sexual identity and that stigmatizes the perpetrator in an obviously racist way.

### 3. Digressions and the way they renegotiate the coherence convention

While coherence as a convention for personal trauma narratives is thought to enable victims of sexual violence to reestablish their selves, *History of Violence* stages reasons why the convention, bound up as it is with the sexist and racist discourse operated by the officers, precisely *obstructs* Édouard’s self-reestablishment. Yet, the novel may thematize how the convention is forced upon Édouard during his interview at the police station, but in itself, it does not necessarily live up to this same convention. Indeed, the novel does not recount the events chronologically or concisely; one of the main literary devices used in the novel is, as I have already mentioned, the digression.

The use of digressions is not even the first and foremost sign that the novel is set up to resist conventions or norms for writing personal trauma narratives. In fact, two remarkable peritextual elements indicate such a set-up from the start: the book’s title, as well as the epigraph placed at the end of the text. The book’s title does not, as one may expect a title of such a book to do, refer to the specific violent episode it recounts, but to the history of violence in general. Therefore, the title suggests that the described violence, although experienced personally, is not recounted as fully personal, but is rather “embedded in a sociological understanding of structural violence” (Mueller 155). This underwrites the thesis, posed by life writing scholar Leigh Gilmore, that “[r]auma is never exclusively personal; it always exists within complicated histories that combine harm and pleasure, along with less inflected dimensions of everyday life. Remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history” (*The Limits of Autobiography* 31). The title *History of Violence*, in other words, announces a personal trauma narrative that may not take the conventional personal form for such narratives, but a form that may account for the broader sociological aspects of the trauma in question as well.

Apart from the title, there is another peritextual element that may steer readers’ expectations away from conventional personal trauma narratives: the epigraph. This epigraph is taken from the autobiographical novel *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* by the Hungarian writer and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész, a novel that testifies to certain aspects of Kertész’s Holocaust trauma. The passage reflects on the relation between writing, truth, happiness, and pain, and while in the academic reception of *History of Violence*, no attention has yet been paid to its epigraph – perhaps because Louis has uncharacteristically placed it at the end of the book where it is easily overlooked – the choice for the Kertész fragment is arguably hazardous: as the Holocaust is commonly perceived as “‘unique’ among human-perpetrated horrors”, comparisons with other instances of violence are considered improper (Rothberg 6). Yet, a comparison between the Holocaust and sexual violence is exactly what Louis is suggesting to make by having selected the Kertész fragment as an epigraph to his novel.

To recapitulate what we have just explored: although *History of Violence* is clearly a personal trauma narrative, there are some indications that the book also challenges the conventions for this type of narrative. The title, for one, suggests that the book does not only recount a personal experience of violence but addresses the structural aspects of this type of violence too. Additionally, the epigraph daringly suggests that the violence done to Édouard can somehow be compared to the violence inflicted upon the Hungarian Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész. Both these peritextual elements suggest that one way in which *History of Violence* challenges the conventions for personal trauma narratives is by accounting not only for the victim’s personal experiences, but also, presumably in the great number of digressions in the novel, for the social aspects of the violence or its relations with other types of violence. This, I want to suggest, forms an intriguing indication for what to look for when we will explore the already named digressions as modes of renegotiating the coherence norm for trauma narratives.

#### **4. *History of Violence* as multidirectional testimony**

The digression I want to have a closer at in this section is the one at the beginning of *History of Violence*’s fifth chapter. There, narrator Édouard recounts how Reda told him about the journey that his father made as a refugee from Kabylia to France: “He crossed the desert, he slept on the sand and in the dirt, hidden in the bushes.” (Louis 41) The main part of the digression is about Reda’s father’s arrival and time in a French immigrant hostel. Édouard recounts how Reda told him that his father always described the “manager as a violent and tyrannical man” (Louis 41). He recounts how Reda told him about the frequent fires that “would be part of his life in the hostel, that sometimes they’d be fatal”, about the fact that “he could be deported for any reason”, about the filth and the insects; in short about the wretched circumstances and frequent violence Reda’s father experienced during his first years in France (Louis 44; 45).

Indeed, this episode functions as a digression from a supposedly coherent narrative about Édouard’s sexual assault, as its focus is not this assault, but instead the violence that a member of the perpetrator’s family had to endure as an immigrant from a country formerly colonized by France. This violence, we learn, still has visible effects on the life of Reda, for example in the economic sense, as Reda cannot find employment other than minor plumbing construction chores here and there (Louis 58). Thus, *History of Violence* resists the coherence convention for trauma narratives and instead digresses to recount not only the story of the violence that Édouard has experienced but also the story about the violence that the perpetrator and even the perpetrator’s father has experienced in his life. It is by resisting coherence that the novel can resist the racist tropes that the police considered to be contributing to the coherence of Édouard trauma narrative; by digressing,

the novel instead draws a line between the violence experienced by the victim and the violence experienced by the perpetrator, thereby underwriting Gilmore's already cited thesis that "[t]rauma is never exclusively personal" (*The Limits of Autobiography* 31).

What I want to suggest, is that *History of Violence*, with its digressive set-up and the space that, through this set-up, is cleared for not only the events of the traumatizing night but related instances of violence too, should be seen not as a conventional personal trauma narrative, but more specifically as a *multidirectional testimony* of personal trauma. Indeed, I would want to coin this concept of multidirectional testimony in the extension of the concept of multidirectional memory introduced by Michael Rothberg in his 2009 study under that same title. In this study, Rothberg questions the "uniqueness paradigm" that dominates the cultural memory of the Holocaust, a paradigm that renders comparisons between the events of the Holocaust and other "histories of victimization" unethical or simply unacceptable (Rothberg 6). In the course of his study, Rothberg discusses several Holocaust commemorating artworks that date from before the installation of the uniqueness paradigm and finds that in them, the events of the Holocaust were related or even compared to instances of colonial violence, which made these artworks distinctly multidirectional modes of commemorating the historical event.

*History of Violence* indeed seems to inscribe itself in this tradition of distinctly multidirectional ways of commemorating violence – with its choice of the Kertész epigraph, as well as with its digressive set-up that allows Louis as a writer to relate the violence inflicted upon him to the coloniality-related violence inflicted upon his perpetrator. One of the potential effects of recounting a violent experience in a multidirectional way is that lines of solidarity, however fragile, can be drawn between people that in the 'coherent' version of the story would have been each other's opposites: the victim and the perpetrator. Let's have one more look at the digression about Reda's father. While Édouard digresses about what happened to Reda's father upon his arrival in France, he digresses again within this digression, by relating Reda's father's experiences to his own. In fact, he explains that when Reda told him about the rude and violent manager welcoming his father to the immigrant hostel, he envisioned the manager by involuntarily remembering the appearance of a witch-like and detested woman from the village he grew up (Louis 41). He then recounts a part of the tragic history of this woman, thereby drawing a line of solidarity between not only the manager and this woman, suggesting that the manager may have had a tragic history of himself that made him the violent man that he was, but also between Reda's loved ones and his own.

A similar line of solidarity is drawn in a different digression in *History of Violence*. In this digression, Édouard's sister pauses her report of Édouard's assault to her husband to tell him a story from their shared youth, which Édouard overhears as he is still secretly positioned behind the door. The story is about the time that Édouard's sister caught Édouard and his friend going out stealing. She tells the anecdote after she has told her husband how Édouard, during the traumatizing night, caught Reda stealing his iPad. When Édouard told her about this particular event, she recalls, he explained to her that he thought it somehow made sense for Reda to steal, thereby expressing solidarity with his perpetrator at this point. His sister, a person of principle, did not agree with him at all. The anecdote that follows explains their difference in opinion about the topic of stealing: as Édouard's sister recounts, by going stealing with his friends, Édouard risked being punished for it by his father, while at the same time, his father would somehow be proud of him as well. His sister explains: "Now that he's stolen, now that he's disobeyed his father, Édouard has finally become a man" (Louis 64).

Whereas the anecdote about the young Édouard going out stealing has little to do with the sexual violence he experienced, and thus clearly forms a digression from the presumed

coherent narrative about his trauma, something crucial happens in it. Not only does it draw a line of solidarity between the supposed victim and the supposed perpetrator in the trauma narrative, it in fact elaborates the specifics of this line of solidarity: as gay men from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, both Édouard and Reda were brought up with pressing masculinity norms installed by their fathers – and stealing, however paradoxically, would be one of the ways to live up to these norms. Thus, the digression does not only allow for nuancing the assumed unbridgeable gap between victim and perpetrator, it also allows to elaborate the intersectional situatedness of the victim and the perpetrator that grounds the line of solidarity between them. Indeed, this digression could be read as an instance of the multidirectionality of *History of Violence*’s set-up, as it makes space for, in the words of Rothberg, “visions that construct solidarity out of the specificities, overlaps, and echoes of different historical experiences” (Rothberg 16).

I would want to make one last step in this exploration. Besides the possibility of drawing lines of solidarity between parties that, in conventional trauma narratives, would be presented as opposites or antagonists, and the possibility of elaborating the intersectional backgrounds of these lines of solidarity, there is a third, related effect of the multidirectional set-up of *History of Violence* visible in the digressions just analyzed: a reestablishment of Édouard’s identity. As Rothberg emphasizes, the uniqueness paradigm that dominates the cultural memory of the Holocaust is “flawed” because it views “the public sphere as a pre-given, limited space in which already-established groups engage in a life-and-death struggle” (Rothberg 5; 3). Multidirectional types of commemorating or narrating, on the other hand, acknowledge that identities are not already established or pre-given, but in fact *produced* in the act of commemorating or narrating, and thus these multidirectional types of narrating encourage “us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually *come into being through their dialogical interactions with others*; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction” (Rothberg 5, my emphasis).

Indeed, I want to suggest, it is in the digressions, as instances of multidirectional trauma narration, that the identity of Édouard, shattered by trauma, comes into being again through its relations with others. As we may remember, in the ‘coherent’ version of Édouard’s trauma narrative crystallized in the official report, Reda was stigmatized as a stereotypical ‘Arab male’ perpetrator and Édouard as a stereotypical irresponsible gay male victim who has, at least partly, himself to blame for his assault. But in several digressions in *History of Violence*, the identity of both men is established otherwise. The digression about the experiences of Reda’s father as a new immigrant in France resists the racist stereotyping in the police’s version of Édouard’s trauma narrative and establishes Édouard’s identity in a relationship of solidarity with the cultural background of his perpetrator. In addition, the digression about the young Édouard going out stealing resists the sexist stereotyping in the police’s official report, a stereotyping that suggests gay men are irresponsible because of their sexuality. It thereby establishes Édouard’s identity in a relationship of solidarity with the economic and sexual background of his perpetrator, a background that Édouard in fact shares, by explaining how behavior that would commonly be perceived as ‘irresponsible’, such as inviting strangers home or stealing, may come about in relation to masculinity norms imposed on people with this background.

## Conclusion

In the course of this article, we have seen how *History of Violence* as a trauma narrative renegotiates the coherence convention for such texts and can be read as what I suggested to dub a multidirectional testimony of sexual trauma. The first step we took was to expose how *History of Violence* indeed shows signs of the victim’s loss of self, as theory points out



to be characteristic of victims of murderous sexual assault. Personal trauma narratives, we saw, are thought to take up a key role in the reestablishment of this sense of self, and in both therapeutic and legal contexts, coherence is viewed as an essential convention to live up to in conveying such a personal trauma narrative. In the scene at the police station, *History of Violence* indeed stages the importance attached to coherence as a convention for trauma narratives: the officers interviewing Édouard explicitly impose coherence as a norm on his trauma story. Yet, as this same scene makes clear, the version of the story that the officers understand to be coherent involves explicit racist and sexist tropes, othering the perpetrator, as well as victim-blaming Édouard.

Yet, as we have seen, two paratextual aspects of *History of Violence* indicate that the set-up of the novel may in fact differ from conventional personal trauma narratives. In the first place, the title suggests that the violence that is the book's topic is not viewed as incidental or personal but as part of a socially and historically specific network of acts of violence. In the second place, there is the epigraph at the end of the novel, taken from a book by Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész, which challenges the uniqueness paradigm dominating the commemoration of the Holocaust by drawing a line of comparison between the violence experienced by Kertész and the violence experienced by Louis. Indeed, *History of Violence* can be read as not a conventional personal trauma narrative, but as a distinctly multidirectional testimony: *History of Violence*, as we have seen, contains digressions that resist the coherence norm imposed on Édouard at the police station by clearing space for drawing lines of solidarity between victim and perpetrator. In a digression about Reda's father's history, we saw a line of solidarity being drawn between the violence Reda's father has experienced as a refugee, as well as with Reda as a second-generation refugee, and the violence Édouard experienced being raped by Reda; the digression, we have argued, thereby nuances the racist, stereotype version of the trauma narrative in the official report. Additionally, in a digression about the young Édouard going out stealing, a line of solidarity is drawn between the economic and sexual backgrounds of victim and perpetrator, thereby nuancing the sexist-stereotypical version of the story in the police's report.

What I finally wanted to argue, is that it is by renegotiating the coherence norm in the described ways that *History of Violence* reestablishes Édouard's self, shattered as it was by sexual assault and repressed instead of expressed in the 'coherent' version of the story imposed on Édouard by the police. The novel in fact reestablishes Édouard's self in a multidirectional way, acknowledging the instances of violence that Édouard has endured earlier in life, but most importantly, the violence that other people involved in the story have experienced. Instead of letting Édouard's sexual identity be repressed as in the official report, the author of *History of Violence* digresses and thereby reestablishes Édouard's identity in a relation of solidarity with his perpetrator's sexual identity: he acknowledges that they both, because of sharing economic and sexual backgrounds, or in other words a certain intersectional situatedness, are regularly confronted with masculinity norms. The self that is reestablished in *History of Violence*, thus, is not precisely a coherent self, but a fragmented, relational and multidirectional one. Therefore, the novel indeed illustrates what Susan Brison concludes, namely that the "recovery [of the self after sexual assault] [does not seem] to consist of picking up the pieces of a shattered self (or fractured narrative). It's facing the fact that there never was a coherent self (or story) there to begin with" (Brison 116).\*



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# Baroque Cross-dressers in the Orient: Seveo Sarduy and Pierre Loti

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IPEK SAHINLER

What counts is the question, of what is a body capable? And thereby Spinoza sets out one of the most fundamental questions in his whole philosophy by saying that the only question is that we do not even know [*savons*] what a body is capable of, we prattle on about the soul and the mind and we don't know what a body can do.

— Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*

The perambulatory gesture [...] is in itself the effect of successive encounters and occasions that are constantly altering it into the advertisement of the other, the agent of whatever may surprise, cross or seduce its route. These aspects establish a rhetoric; they even define it.

—Michel de Certeau

Ir más allá es un regreso.

—Severo Sarduy

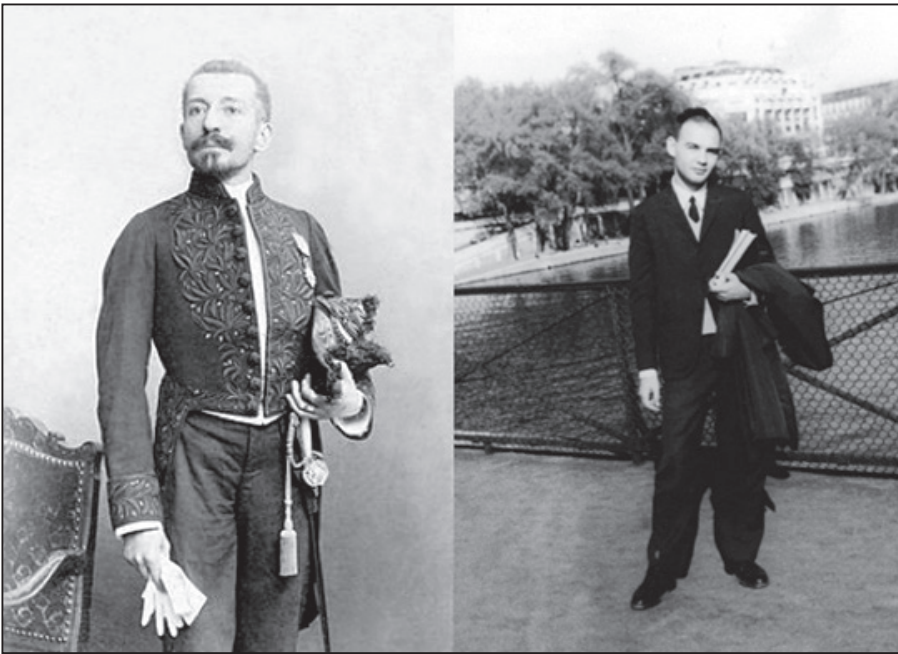
**Abstract:** The Cuban neobaroque nomad-writer Severo Sarduy's (1936–93) “Oriental” journeys started in the Middle East, precisely in 1961, in Turkey. Going back one hundred years in time, a similar pattern is observed in the life and works of the renowned French travelogue-writer Pierre Loti (1850–1923), who arrived in Constantinople in 1876. For these writers who both tackled the notion of sexual and national identity in their works, the “Orient” represented a journey, a quest, a moving away from the *Center*, as well as a cruise towards self. This paper investigates this overlooked connection and argues that the Ottoman practice of *tebdil-i kıyafet* (cross-dressing; self-disguise) plays a crucial role in the formation of Severo Sarduy's neobaroque aesthetics, whose idea of the “Orient,” as I will argue, subconsciously replicates nineteenth-century French Orientalism reverberated in Loti's writings. To demonstrate this, I compare parts of Sarduy's masterpiece *De donde son los cantantes* (1967, *From Cuba With a Song*) to Pierre Loti's well-acclaimed novel *Aziyadé* (1879) and zoom into two core gestures found in these texts: a strategical (mis)use of the local dressing practices and an exotic conceptualization of the “Orient,” which go hand in hand. As the paper brings together these two writers who have never been studied together, it analyzes their desire to travel along a route *vers l'est* and capture the allure of “Oriental” places. In turn, I conceptualize the notion called “transgressing/transdressing baroque aesthetics” and use it to identify traces of the traveler's quest to access alternate forms of self-making and identity-building in the “East.”

**Keywords:** baroque, cross-dressing, queerness, Orientalism, Latin American literature, French literature

## Putting Loti and Sarduy Side by Side

Pierre Loti and Severo Sarduy share many undiscovered commonalities in their writerly aesthetics and life stories. Louis Marie Julien Viaud, or by his *nom de plume* Pierre Loti, was born in Rocheford in 1850 to Protestant parents. When he was sixteen, he

moved to Paris to study at the French Academy and became acquainted with acclaimed writers and artists of the time. Although he was a denizen of the Parisian literary scene, he felt estranged and fell into a crisis of life, faith, and identity. Shortly after, Loti laid the foundations of his exilic life by beginning a naval career that entailed long absences from his home country. In a way, this was a conscious decision on Loti's part that reflected his desire to be far away from France as he was at odds with the heteronormative codes predominating the social and quotidian grounds of the *fin-de-siècle* society.<sup>1</sup> Like Sarduy a century after, Loti never stopped traveling, painting, writing, and having photographs taken dressed in "exotic"<sup>2</sup> costumes. For much of his life, he travelled to places like Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, Indochina, and Japan, all being pilgrimages resonating with Sarduy's nomadic life and his route across the Orient. Loti spent much time in Levantine ports, the Far East and died in 1923 at his house in Rochford, France. The house was a unique place that reflected his passion for collecting "exotic" objects from his travels. He created ornamental rooms adorned with statues, masks, and all sorts of paraphernalia to replicate the interiors he had loved in places like Istanbul and Tokyo, all expressions of Loti's performative and baroque<sup>3</sup> sensibility.



Sarduy's life story began approximately a century after Loti's, in Cuba. Born in 1937 to working-class parents from Camagüey—one of the most traditional of the Cuban provinces, as Roberto Gonzales Echeverría has pointed out—he did not come from a privileged background, unlike most of his artistic contemporaries, which is odd given Sarduy's own effete, aggressively postmodern, anti-conventional aesthetics. He relocated to Havana to study medicine to satisfy his parents' wishes, and the move became his ticket to the heart of the Cuban literary scene. There, he earned a living as a copy editor and became a regular contributor to literary magazines such as *Nueva Revista Cubana*, *Ciclón*, *Revolución*, *Lunes de Revolución* and *Artes Plásticas*. 1959 was a pivotal year in Sarduy's life as he left for Paris to study the arts at the Ecole du Louvre. There, he worked with notorious French intellectuals as well as apostles of Latin American literature like Julio Cortázar, Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes,

Mario Vargas Llosa and Octavio Paz. At the time, these names had converged in Europe due to Latin America's turbulent political climate marked by the reverberations of the Cuban Revolution. With an increasing number of exiled writers and self-exile artists, Europe, and especially Paris, had become the hub of suppressed voices from Latin America, which later gave birth to *boom latinoamericano* (the Latin American boom). Sarduy was an on-site witness to this historical period and literary blossoming. He had stayed in France due to the political turmoil in Cuba, the disbanding of the newspapers for which he wrote, and the spread of anti-homosexual propaganda of the Castro regime. This was also the year in which Sarduy's nomadic life began as he burnt his *guayabera*, the traditional Cuban shirt, and decided to not return to Cuba ever again.<sup>4</sup>

Like Loti, Sarduy's literary muscles were developed primarily within the artistic scene of Paris. He was associated with the French school of thought and befriended members of the progressive literary magazine *Tel Quel* like Roland Barthes<sup>5</sup>, Julia Kristeva, and Philippe Sollers. Rolando Pérez notes that "it is his connections with the French writers that have led many critics to accuse Sarduy of being more French than Cuban" (2004: 96). In fact, it was in Paris that Sarduy wrote his first novel *Gestos* (Gestures, 1963). Then why did Sarduy, as a Paris-nourished intellectual producing art freely at the epicenter of Europe, leave the comfortable shores of France for an unknown, murky future in the "East"? Or in Gustavo Guerrero's words, "¿por qué el Oriente de Severo Sarduy?" (2008: 19). Guerrero, an authoritative figure in the discussion of "el Oriente de Sarduy," wants us to note that "este cubano que viaja por Oriente y se disfraza de oriental es un contemporáneo del Mayo francés y de los hippies"<sup>6</sup> (2008: 24). In a way, he implies that Sarduy's interest for the "East" should primarily be thought of in relation to the times in which he lived, when there was a crisis of morality and dissatisfaction with Occidental values. It is true and already given that Sarduy was a product of his time, mainly influenced by anti-Occidentalist thinkers and artists like Juan Goytisolo, Roland Barthes, François Cheng and Wilfredo Lam, as well as his French and North American contemporaries who dreamed of "un utópico porvenir no-occidental" [a non-Occidental utopian futurity; *my translation*] (ibid.). However, there is a need to move beyond Guerrero's sound yet insufficient analysis in order to make nouvelle interpretations about the overlooked queerness behind Sarduy's writings about the Orient that cannot solely be explained via history-based inferences.

I believe that Sarduy's interest towards the Orient<sup>7</sup> had to do, first and foremost, with his search for the "true" meaning of *cubanidad*; an amalgamation of African, Chinese, and Spanish heritage, or what he calls *curriculum cubense*<sup>8</sup> (Cuban curriculum). Tied to this, his second and more important concern was to discover his self, and relatedly, his desires. Here, I would like to draw on queer theory to clarify what I specifically mean by the consanguinity between selfhood and desire. In an early-1990s discussion about the functionality (or utility) of queer thinking, Lee Edelman noted that "queer theory might better remind us that we are inhabited always by states of desire that exceed our capacity to name them" (1995: 345). By raising the question "can desire survive its naming?" (ibid.) Edelman argued against using "queer" as an all-encompassing identity category. For him, "queer theory [could] only remain a desire, and like desire, it depended [...] on the impossibility of knowing its boundaries" (ibid.). Accordingly, he proposed that the task of queer theory, though impossible and self-deconstructive, should be "to interrogate the contradictory directions in which *desire and identity*<sup>9</sup> always operate" (ibid.).

In line with Edelman, who offered an avant-garde understanding of queerness based on anti-identitarian politics and the relationality between "desire and identity," Louise O. Vásvari put forward a conceptualization of queerness based primarily on desire. Expanding on Rusty Barrett's definition of "homogenius" speech community,

Vásvari argued that “[queerness] is centered in desire rather than in identity” (2006: 2). However, “the differences in how one directs desire, as well as how one is faced by others,” as Sara Ahmed points out, “can move us and hence can affect even the most deeply ingrained patterns of relating to others” (2006: 545). Therefore, “the desire of, and for, queer theory demands continuous—and continuously unsettling—challenge to the institutionalization of pleasures” (1995: 345). The deinstitutionalization of pleasures and relationality between desire and identity is what we observe in Loti’s and Sarduy’s writings mainly via unnamed characters with fluid sexualities. In *Aziyadé* and *De donde son los cantantes*, the protagonists roam in the “East” by camouflaging themselves, engage in carnal activities not necessarily heteronormative, discover their non-linear desires as a result, yet never categorize or institutionalize themselves around pre-defined identities or nameable desires.

Using queer theory in the analysis of Loti and Sarduy is further meaningful, for both writers had problematic relationships with their national and sexual identities. To them, the “East” simply acted as a gateway through which they discovered their “desires and identities” in a wor(l)ding that did not necessarily classify their queerness as deviance or aberration. In fact, bringing queer theory into a comparative reading of Loti and Sarduy is congruous since “the study of norms and deviance,” as Heather Love points out, “is central to the intellectual genealogy of queer studies” (2015: 74). Additionally, queer theory’s emphasis on deviancy dovetails with the baroque vein of both writers mainly because the baroque, as Monika Kaup points out, was stigmatized as decadent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though recuperated by a broad range of twentieth-century philosophers (2006: 129). Sarduy, as a twentieth-century neobaroque aesthete, and Loti, a nineteenth century baroque writer, move towards the “East” with the hopes of drifting apart from the socially constructed expressions of heterosexual desire. In line with this, there is particular emphasis on the cross-dressing protagonists of Loti’s *Aziyadé* and Sarduy’s *De donde son los cantantes* as individuals who embrace their decadency and harken their desires.

### A Common Urge to Write the Orient

Like Loti, Sarduy was in his mid-twenties when he began his “Oriental” journeys. He chose Turkey as the starting point for his travels in the Middle East—again, just like Loti. Though both were naturalized French citizens, they spent their lives mostly on the road, perpetually displacing themselves from one place to another. Towards the end of their lives, both settled in France to lead a sedentary life. India, Morocco, Algiers, Tunisia, Iran, Indonesia, Ceylon, China, and Japan were amongst the places their roads intersected unknowingly. The same places they visited in different eras became blueprints for their writerly aesthetics and autobiographical novels. Given the fact that numerous writers’ paths have also coincided on the route *vers l’est*, what makes Sarduy’s and Loti’s intersecting journeys special?

The first striking commonality between Loti and Sarduy that concerns this study is their urge to not only experience, but to copiously write and describe the Orient. This inscriptional drive is reminiscent of the graphomania that nineteenth-century Orientalists manifested via travel writings, memoirs, diaries, and photographic journals. The question of how Loti and Sarduy inhabited (*habiter*) and in-habited (*habiller*) “foreign” lands constitutes the second and more striking commonality between them: they used cross-dressing, camouflage, and self-disguise as a quotidian strategy and literary motif while they lived in and wrote about the Orient. What I mean by cross-dressing here is not “the act of wearing clothes usually worn by the opposite sex” (Cambridge English Dictionary). Accordingly, my use of the term “cross-dresser” is not synonymous



to a person “who is satisfied to wear feminine finery and assume female mannerisms” (Oxford English Dictionary). What I mean by cross-dressing is rather a self-disguising strategy driven by the desire to discover oneself by acting and dressing up like the *other*. As a notion, therefore, cross-dressing is about the will to know oneself from the lens of the *other's* texts and textiles (and therefore wording and worlding). Contrary to the current lexical definitions of “cross-dresser,” hence, my understanding of the term is not bound by a drive to ooze into the realm of the opposite sex, nor is it based on a dichotomous thinking.



If so, how can we make sense of Loti's and Sarduy's resembling fascination with the Orient? I suggest that the similarities between how Loti and Sarduy obsessively write the Orient can best be understood via the Ottoman practice of *tebdil-i kıyafet*<sup>10</sup> (cross-dressing; self-disguise). Though I will unpack this notion shortly ahead, *tebdil-i kıyafet*, simply put, was the strategy of changing clothes to inhabit social spheres that one would not normally be allowed to. In Ottoman society, both men and women disguised their bodies and titivated themselves with the necessary attires so as to easily shift between religiously, politically and sexually encoded, sealed spheres.<sup>11</sup> The dressed up, performative, jeweled nature of Loti's and Sarduy's baroque prose style is reminiscent of the Ottoman self-camouflaging strategy. In a similar vein, both writers tried to surpass the rigid spatial and gender boundaries of “Oriental” societies by cross-dressing. This is best seen in *Aziyadé* and *De donde son los cantantes*, where Loti and Sarduy create fictional characters who camouflage themselves to surpass spatial and gender boundaries during their time in the “East.”

As Edward Said's discussion on Orientalism informs us, describing the “Orient” or narrating the *Other* is always an attempt to define oneself. It is a systematic exercise in identity construction based on dichotomous thinking and self-reflexive fantasies. Seen from this perspective, Sarduy's and Loti's common urge to “write” the “Orient” reads as a quest to (re)write oneself. However, Said's analysis of Orientalism cannot simply be transposed to countries like Mexico and Cuba as Rubén Gallo points out, mainly because these countries “have never invaded, colonized, or attacked other nations (but



have themselves been the object of many colonizations, attacks and invasions” (2006: 64). Thus, “unlike Flaubert’s writings or Napoleon’s *Déscription de l’Egypte*, Mexican depictions of Eastern cultures cannot be related to real-life imperialist designs” (ibid.) Gallo’s point also applies to Cuba as it has historically been the object, and not the subject, of a systematic colonization process. Still, this leaves us with the paradoxical case of Sarduy; a *cubano* who attempts to “write” the “Orient” during the twentieth century, one hundred years after Loti, with motives only slightly different from Loti’s. Even after we recognize Sarduy’s distinctive neobaroque aesthetics, how do we make sense of the Cuban writer’s “belated,” Lotiesque orientalism?

### Loti in Sarduy’s Words

In an interview with Julia A. Kushigian, Sarduy expresses his view that in Latin America, the first genuine preoccupation with “el oriente verdadero” (the real orient) started with Octavio Paz and that he personally feels more on Paz’s side. He adds: “El Oriente de Darío, o el vago oriente de Lugones, o el oriente de Neruda, o incluso el oriente de Lezama son un poco bibliográficos, a pesar de que Neruda estuvo en Birmania, Ceilán, Indonesia”<sup>12</sup> (2016: 48). Following this, Kushigian drops a “pero” (but) and reminds Sarduy that “el orientalismo de los franceses, digamos el siglo XIX, también es bibliográfico”<sup>13</sup> (ibid.). The writer then affirms Kushigian’s point and brings Pierre Loti into their discussion about Orientalism in Latin America: “Claro, claro, también. Como es de sobra conocido, Pierre Loti, por ejemplo, trabaja más con un código de papel, como decía Roland Barthes, y con la Biblioteca Nacional, como con Jules Verne, que con el Oriente de verdad”<sup>14</sup> (ibid.). While it is unclear what Sarduy means by “the real Orient” here, it is observable how he tries to distance himself from nineteenth-century bibliographic enquirers of the “Orient” like Loti. This impulse of Sarduy is understandable as Loti’s reception had dramatically changed in the wake of Said’s *Orientalism*, with which Said demonstrated how British and French writers distorted the East with a romantic lens made up of their fantasies. Concomitantly, Loti became one of the writers that this nouvelle deluge of criticism has wiped away in the 1980s and onwards.

Sarduy’s above statements, however, do not provide sufficient evidence to claim that his writerly aesthetics were free from bibliographical French Orientalism from which he tried to distance himself. To understand this, I insist on going back to his lexicon and zoom in to his use of the following expressions: “El oriente verdadero” and “el Oriente de verdad.” Semantically speaking, the word “verdadero” (meaning “true,” “real” or “veritable”) implies the existence of a cardinal reality inherent to the object described. It comes from “verdad,” which means “reality” in Spanish. For instance, “This bag is hundred per cent real leather” or “The film we watched was based on a true story” would both point out to the veritable quality of the objects described based on facts. Therefore, when we put “verdad” next to the word “Orient,” the expression “el Oriente verdadero” implies the existence of a “real Orient” based on objective facts. Social sciences and humanities have long proven that this is not the case and that the “Orient” is no one geographical entity whose characteristics can be based on facts, but rather, as Said argues, an ideological grid based on colonial fantasies. Thus, this small lexical analysis shows that Sarduy’s neobaroque aesthetics, contrary to what he claims, embodies fragments from nineteenth-century French Orientalist discourse. Seen from the axis of world-making/word-making, moreover, Sarduy’s linguistic use lays itself bare as one that resonates with the Orientalist *langage*.

The “hidden orientalism” in Sarduy’s speech is also observed in the latter parts of his interview. He reiterates his ideological approximation to Paz as follows: “Yo debo el Oriente a Octavio Paz, en ese sentido. Quiero decir, es el primero de los occidentales.

En tanto que mexicano, ya estaba muy próximo ama esa cultura, pienso, según pienso”<sup>15</sup> (ibid.). A closer reading of this statement reveals the author’s hyper-preoccupation with clarifying that his “Oriente de verdad” is informed by Paz, and therefore the Occident. This is mainly because he defines Paz as “the first of the Occidentals” in Latin America. However, this also creates a direct paradox with Sarduy’s former statement regarding his dissociation with nineteenth-century Occidental writers whom he describes as more “bibliographical.” A closer look at Sarduy’s above remark lays bare that this Cuban writer’s “teacher of the Orient” was a world-renowned Mexican occidentalist, namely Paz. Yet, the expression “Mexican Occidentalism” remains problematic. In his essay called “Mexican Orientalism,” Ruben Gallo notes that “unlike Flaubert’s writings or Napoleon’s *Déscription de l’Egypte*, Mexican depictions of Eastern cultures cannot be related to real-life imperialist designs” (2006: 64). He underlines that this problem has been tackled by several critics, including Kushigian’s *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition*, in an attempt to interpret the predominance of Eastern themes in the writings of Latin American writers. After all, the following questions remain unanswered: how can we make sense out of Sarduy’s above self-contradictory statements about his own “Orient? To be more precise, what does Sarduy’s Orient mean? And what kinds of parallels does it share with that of Loti?

### The Orient as a Neobaroque Journey Towards “Self”

I believe that the answers to the above questions are found in Sarduy’s cross-dressed, abundant, hyper-expressive, daring neobaroque stylistics that encode a turbulent cruise towards his self and desires. Though the neobaroque is quite a personal phenomenon for Sarduy, it is also the sign of the twentieth century, and its invention means a passage. He explains this in his essay called “El barroco y el neobarroco,” where he defines the conceptual basis of his understanding of the neobaroque. Sarduy posits that the neobaroque derives its crux from the Baroque, which means “la ambigüedad de la difusión semántica” (the ambiguity of semantic diffusion) and “el matiz progresivo del sfumato para adoptar la nitidez teatral” (the progressive tint of sfumato to take on theatrical sharpness) (1988: 168). Sarduy underlines that baroque is also pure “outlandishness, extravagance and bad taste” (Martínez Amador) as well as “shocking bizarreness” (Littre). Tied to this, neobaroque becomes the pure energy of a decentralized world in the Sarduyian cosmos: “El barroco, superabundancia, cornucopia rebosante, prodigalidad y derroche—de allí, la resistencia moral que ha suscitado en ciertas culturas de la economía y la medida como la francesa—irrisión de toda funcionalidad, de toda sobriedad, es también la solución a esa saturación verbal, al trop plein de la palabra...”<sup>16</sup> (*Barroco* 247).

What Sarduy means by superabundance, as Djelal Kadir eloquently unpacks, is where “heterogeneities constitute the ever-shifting foundations of a discursive praxis, a heterotopia of poetic language, a sanctioning discourse whose paramount characteristics are ex-centricity, diffusion, random accretion, and prodigal agglomeration” (1986: 87). In other words, Sarduy’s world is “a sea of language turned loose by the undoing of similitude, the shattering of a one-to-one correspondence in representation, the depletion in the ‘naïve’ adequacy of language to orderly resemblance between world and symbol, history and nature, the visible and the invisible, space and image, sign and meaning, signature and signator” (ibid.). This meticulous interpretation by Kadir compels me to raise the following question: what does it mean to create an ekphrastic meditation, or an ornamental bricolage of the “Orient” in the twentieth century as a neobaroque Cuban writer?

Going back to Guerrero, we should not forget how “este Cubano” (this Cuban), who traveled in the East and disguised himself as an Eastern, was a contemporary of the

French May and the hippies (2008: 6). Sarduy's Orient represented "algo más que un objeto científico o una destinación turística: es la posibilidad misma de construir sobre bases nuevas relaciones entre coincidencia, lenguaje y mundo"<sup>17</sup> (ibid.). Thus, Sarduy was "writing" the "Orient" during a crisis of culture informed by post-1968 era and the turbulent political climate of the early 1970s Europe. If so, how did Sarduy position himself as he criticized the Occident: as a Cuban or as a French? Put differently, from *where* was Sarduy speaking when he had turned his face toward the East to dream "un utópico porvenir no-occidental?" Or from *where* did Sarduy speak as he wrote *From Cuba with a Song*? To dream a "non-Occidental utopic futurity" necessitates one to have poetic license to not only speak *from*, but also *for* the *Center*. This shows that Sarduy's ideological positioning was more likely to be welded from the *Center* rather than the periphery. In a way, this also explains how the East was more than a touristic destination for him. As Guerrero notes, the East for Sarduy was a "posibilidad de fundar otra civilización despojándose del apretado corsé judeocristiano"<sup>18</sup> (ibid.). Therefore, his Eastward looking face also denoted his search for an alternative reality free(d) from the puritanism and (hetero)normativity that informs Euro-centric Christian thinking. Sarduy's neobaroque cosmos is a realm in which he meticulously works on and writes about the possibilities of constructing new relations based on hybridity, fluidity, assemblages, networks, and interrelatedness.

In the Sarduyian cosmos, the neobaroque becomes the paradigm for defining a new threshold of modernity different than that of the *Center*, and the "East" is a gateway through which one enters into that "utopic horizon." To do so, no method could be more a propos than a twentieth-century revindication of the baroque in Latin America, which, in Irlemar Chiampi's words, enables "an archeology of the modern [and] allows us to reinterpret Latin American experience as a dissonant modernity" (1998: 508). In addition to being a style and a desire for excessive decoration, the baroque, as César Salgado explains, has been seen—by the great Latin American essayists such as Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Alfonso Reyes and Ernesto Picón Salas, and then the neo-Baroque poets José Lezama Lima and Sarduy—as the art of "counter-conquest" (1999: 318). In other words, it represented the Creole will to create a Latin American culture, essentially hybrid and decentralized, destabilizing the metropolis.

In a Sarduyian text, "crossroads of signs and temporalities, aesthetic logic of mourning and melancholy, luxuriousness and pleasure, erotic convulsion and allegorical pathos reappear to bear witness to the crisis or end of modernity and to the very condition of a continent that could not be assimilated by the project of the Enlightenment" (Chiampi 509). Thus, the Sarduyian text is a non-linear, chaotic, and abundant script that cross-dresses itself to transgress the rigid boundaries of genres and genders, as well as texts and textiles. *De donde son los cantantes* ultimately exemplifies this thematically and stylistically tries to defy the phallogentricity of language and hegemonic "regimes of knowledge" (Foucault) by using cross-dressing (*tebdil-i kıyafet*) as a strategy. In *De donde son los cantantes*, Sarduy envisions to break away from the series of irreconcilable binary oppositions, like East/West, barbarism/civilization, darkness/light, domination/subordination, fantasy/reality and homosexual/heterosexual—all produced and reproduced by the Orientalist discourse itself, upon which Sarduy self-contradictorily draws.

For Sarduy and Loti, the "Orient" is also a "utopic" place. It is rather a heterotopia where the writer can freely write, invent, disguise, cross-dress and re-invent himself, which eventually translates into a perpetual process of doing and undoing his identity. Loti does this in *Aziyade*; an erotic tale or a pseudo-historical novel depicting the non-normative love affair between a British soldier, his young male server and a Circassian slave woman married to a Turk, who in the end kills herself in despair after her British

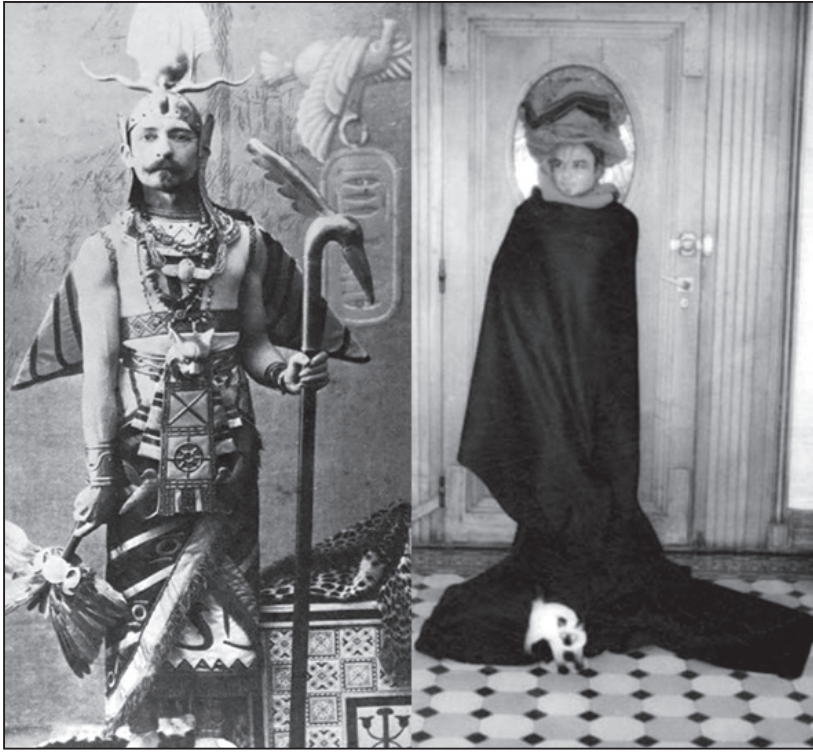
lover is sent back to Europe. The protagonist, who is thought to be Loti, often cross-dresses to see his lover, disguising himself in Oriental fabrics. In an essay about about *Aziyadé*, Roland Barthes, who was Sarduy's tutor in Paris, famously writes: "Loti est dans le roman [...]; mais il est aussi en dehors, puisque le Loti qui a écrit le livre ne coïncide nullement avec le héros Loti"<sup>19</sup> (*Nouveaux essais critiques* 336). I disagree with Barthes' stance since we see autobiographical traces in *Aziyadé* that directly resonate with Loti's heterodox life in Istanbul.

In Constantinople, Loti was known as a man who often cross-dressed to fulfill his queer desires. Diana Knight calls "this insistence on the impossible desire to represent reality in words 'the utopian fiction of literature'" (1997: 9). The reality of Loti's words may have supplanted the reality of his existence (Armbrecht 4), which resonates with Sarduy's life and writings. Yet Sarduy differs from Loti in his awareness of what Barthes called "l'inadéquation fondamentale du langage et du réel,"<sup>20</sup> or in other words, "des utopies de langage"<sup>21</sup> (Lecon 806). This is mainly due to Sarduy's neobaroque aesthetics and his almost proto-postmodern understanding of language as a medium that constructs and deconstructs the self. I propose that the use of *tebdil-i kıyafet* (cross-dressing) is a means to achieve this in Sarduy, both thematically and stylistically.

### From *Tebdil-i kıyafet* to Sarduy's Neobaroque Cross-dressing Practices

I shall flesh out the implications of my title's key term for the argument that follows: "baroque cross-dressers." How do the terms "baroque" and "cross-dresser" serve as useful conceptual tools for comparing Sarduy's conjunction of neobaroque with Loti's Oriental fantasies and Ottoman fetishism? *Tebdil-i kıyafet* is a quotidian strategy that originates in the Middle East. Etymologically, the word *tebdil* or *tabdil* means "transmutation" and is frequently featured in late-Ottoman Turkish and Arabic texts. *Lisan al-arab*, one of the most comprehensive Arabic dictionaries written by Ibn Manzur in 1290, defines *tabdil* as the change from one form (*surah*) to another. Another source, *Kamus-i Turki*, a crucial Turkish dictionary written by Şemseddin Sami in 1901, defines *tebdil* with similar terms. Finally, a key word that comes across in the lexical definition of *tebdil* is *surah/suret*. It means image, guise, copy, and cloth (*kılık/qiyāfah*). On the other hand, it can also refer to literary forms or genres in various Arabic and Turkish writings. More than anything, however, *tebdil* denotes the strategy of cross-dressing to hide one's identity and thus to move around freely in disguise. For example, it is known that the Ottoman sultan, Selim III, (1789-1824) often disguised himself as a poor merchant and engaged in *tebdil* to control the quality of bread in Istanbul (Tızlak 337). Thus, clothes were instruments that gave people the ability to move in new social milieus. Therefore, individuals in Ottoman society cross-dressed to move around, blend in and adapt to communities foreign to them.

Texts too can engage in *tebdil* as they disguise themselves or change appearance strategically in order to live in "foreign" cultures or social environments that they are not allowed to do so. Therefore, it is meaningful to draw an analogy between the words "text" and "textile" in English, mainly departing from their lexical—and ideological—consanguinity. Similarly in Arabic, there is a very close and curious relationship between these words. *Surah* and *suret* both mean "cloth" and "genre." Hence, words such as cloth, text, textile, genre and gender are also at play with each other in Arabic. This is also what inspired me to draw a connection between *tebdil-i kıyafet* and Sarduy's Oriental(ist) neobaroque aesthetics that always encapsulate the theme of self-camouflage. In *De donde son los cantantes*, the characters and narrative perpetually change appearance and cross-dress, emphasizing a strong semantic connection between text and textile.



According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “cross-dresser” is “a person, typically a man, who derives pleasure from dressing in clothes primarily associated with the opposite sex.” Unlike the OED lexicographers, Sarduy understands a cross-dresser to be someone who does not abide by conceptualizations based on dichotomous thinking, like man versus woman. The cross-dresser, which we encounter in the form of *travesti* in his writings, is a crosser of social boundaries and a subverter of limits. He describes *el travesti* as follows:

El travesti no imita a la mujer. Para él, *à la limite*, no hay mujer, sabe – y quizás, paradójicamente sea el único en saberlo–, que *ella* es una apariencia, que su reino y la fuerza de su fetiche encubren un defecto [...] El travesti no copia: simula, pues no hay norma que invite y magnetice la transformación, que decida la metáfora: es más bien la inexistencia del ser mimado lo que constituye el espacio, la región o el soporte de esa simulación<sup>22</sup> (*Simulación* 98).

This passage shows that Sarduy’s baroque simulation, in Gilles Deleuze’s words, “has an operative function” (*Le pli* 6). By grouping them in the same energy of simulation drive, it connects dissimilar phenomena coming from heterogeneous and apparently unconnected spaces that go from the organic to the imaginary, from the biological to the baroque. Concomitantly, we often see Sarduy using animal imagery, tattoos, makeup, masks, “exotic” objects, textiles, local costumes, Mimikri-Dress-Art and anamorphosis, which all together form a *trompe-l’oeil*. In fact, Sarduy unpacks his view in an essay called “Escritura/ Transvestismo”<sup>23</sup> and defines the transvestite as a person who carries the experience of inversion to the limit. He then concurs that *travesti* is the best metaphor for writing. I would like to slightly expand Sarduy’s statement by adding that *el travesti*, in Sarduy, is the best metaphor for writing the self through the Orient. *De donde son los cantantes* exemplifies my point. As I will show below, the novel is a rather carnivalesque world of performers and cross-dressers who all live in the “Orient.”



### “Where Are the Cross-Dressers From?”

*De donde son los cantantes* is a hard-to-define text for it thematically and stylistically suspends reason, and strongly resists classifications. Roberto González Echevarría once declared that it is “probably the most aggressively experimental text in contemporary Latin American literature” (1985: 566). In an attempt to sum it up, it is an amalgamation of metaphors framed within the holy trinity of Cuban identity: Spanish, African and Chinese. The text’s aim is to baroquify *the curriculum cubense* as well as to blur the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Therefore, the main questions that make up the core of the text are “Who is the Cuban?” “What is *cubanidad*?” “How is the ‘self’ constituted?” and “How does writing play a role in the process of self-formation?” In order to further complicate these questions, but not give direct, satisfactory responses to the audience, Sarduy divides *De donde son los cantantes* into three chapters, each representing the three intertwined cultural identities that constitute “Cuba as fiction.”<sup>24</sup>

The dioscuric twins Auxilio and Socorro are the main characters who wander between the Orient and Occident, writing almost the metahistory of Cuba. The protagonists do not conform to standard novelistic requirements as they perpetually change appearance and disguise themselves, mainly with ornamented paraphernalia from the Orient. This is most prominent in the last chapter called “La entrada de Cristo en La Habana” which is interwoven with Sarduy’s statement about the history of Cuba starting in Andalucía. What is omnipresent here is a colonial center (Spain) influenced by Arabs and an abundance of culturally mixed signifiers travelling through Cuba:

Ese vino hizo de provincias virreinos, ennobleció generaciones de traficantes y negreros. Buscan un imposible, es cierto, pero van muy bien pertrechadas. Mendigan avisos por garitos y colmenas –los burdeles malagueños–; en esas celdas, pordioseras apócrifas, cartománticas, celestinas, sobornan princesas negras, huríes de harenes magrebíes, eunucos mal castrados que les responden con sus voces contralto. (178)<sup>25</sup>

The passage is loaded with imagery that garnishes fantasies about an unknown land. Alcohol, traffickers, blacksmiths, Malagan brothels, cartomantics (fortune tellers), Palestinian beasts, bribed black princesses, hurries of Maghreb harems and poorly castrated eunuchs. As stated, all these signs “look for an impossibility” (buscan un imposible). Furthermore, the cardinal adjective that defines the tone of this passage is “apocryphal,” meaning “doubtfully authentic.” While the overall verisimilitude of this geography cannot be questioned on Platonic grounds due to the baroque quintessence of the text, one can still spot the fantasizing tone as nouns, adjectives and verbs used here evoke nineteenth-century Orientalist jargon utilized to describe the “East.” The following passage from *Aziyadé* mirrors this situation. It is the January of 1871 and Loti is strolling around the streets of Constantinople in a dark-skied afternoon. He sees a marble bridge of “Arab taste” that allows sultanas to pass from one to the other without being seen from the outside, and he ponders:

Des soldats et des eunuques noirs gardaient ces entrees defendues. Les styles de ces portiques semblait indiquer lui-meme que le seuil en etait dangereux a franchir; les colonnes et les frises de marbre, fouillees a jour dans le gout arabe, etaient couvertes de dessins etranges et d'enroulements mysterieux (104).<sup>26</sup>

Though the time period and geography are definite here, contrary to what we see in Sarduy, this passage contains surprisingly common imagery with Sarduy’s text: eunuchs, black servants, sultanas, and princesses. A close-up of the adjectives lay bare another layer of similarity in tone: dangerousness, mysteriousness and forbidden-ness of the East. Both writers use “foreign,” unknown, ambiguous imagery to fashion their texts. While Loti installs these images in an orderly fashion, Sarduy’s style is rather disordered



and chaotic. In fact, the “exotic” paraphernalia that Sarduy sketches side by side would hardly make sense in an “actual” local setting in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia. Thus, Sarduy mutates into a collector who adorns his text with miscellaneous paraphernalia to create an aesthetics of abundance. This is reminiscent of Loti’s obsession of creating baroque rooms in his Rocheford house, which, as we know from historical documents and photographs, were filled with exotic objects. As Loti wrote in his journal in 1881, he decided to create “un petit appartement mystérieux ou [il] pourrait [s’]enfermer pour rever de Stamboul”<sup>27</sup> (Journal 243). Armbrrecht reminds us that “it is this desire to return, mentally, if not physically, to Turkey that must have encouraged Loti to start building the apartment as he started writing. In fact, there is evidence that the two creative efforts were mutually dependent” (2003: 5). Even though Loti’s aspirations for authenticity can sometimes be limited to a romantic desire to create “exotic” interiors, what we see in common in Sarduy and Loti is two craftsmen weaving their texts with Oriental textiles. Furthermore, Sarduy’s cross-dressers in *De donde son los cantantes* transcend the social boundaries in the “East.” Socorro confirms this for she utters as follows: “Yo, la transcendente, la necia.” Likely to the self-disguising protagonist in *Aziyádé* who wears his naval uniform during the day, yet puts on a shalwar with a fez at night, Sarduy’s cross-dressers transgress the opaque social boundaries by transdressing themselves. The transvestites Auxilio and Socorro are pure actors. Their essence consists in the performance of themselves, hence their artificial speech and an obsession with makeup. These two characters are pure allegories, like the characters of the Shanghai Theater in the novel. Yet, they are not so much confronted with the cruel reality that mistreats them as grotesque characters, but, rather, are exemplary figures in their own worlds. Auxilio and Socorro’s cross-dressing practices also operate on a linguistic level. They deliberately talk in an artificial manner and use a wide range of familiar expressions derived from politics, literature, movies, as well as from European and North American pop music.

Echevarría notes that Auxilio and Socorro “include not only the author, who sometimes identifies himself as ‘I’ and who pretends to explain the work in a note at the end, but also the reader, who occasionally complains about something the other characters do” (1985: 567). Parallel to these characters’ vesting of their identities in flux with *vestidos*, they fashion their *langage* with vulgarism or *chusmería*. The language, which is a rhetorical *vestido*, helps characters mask their different identities and cross rigid spatial boundaries. Pérez notes that according to Sarduy, culture and language are modes of disguise; fictions which oftentimes pretend to be otherwise (2013: 12). Thus, Cuba is the product of figural and literary cross-dressing. This pattern is also found in Loti’s novel for he uses different types of linguistic *mis en scene* for the diverse spaces the protagonist (himself) inhabits in Istanbul like *kıraathanes* (coffee house), *mahalles* (neighbourhood), *hamams* (the Turkish bath), homes and *tavernas* (tavern). Comparatively speaking, the practice of cross-dressing in Loti and Sarduy has an operative function in Deleuzian sense: it operates to saturate, to queer, to baroqueify the reality of the language used for the cross-dresser’s own imagery.

Such a baroque fascination with the “Orient” and cross-dressing is also present in another work of Sarduy titled *Cobra*. Published in 1972, *Cobra* is one of the most radical works of Sarduy. The anagrammatic title itself represents the first disguise: “obra” and “baroc,” which together hint at the baroque vein of the piece as an “obra baroc.” The protagonist of the novel is a *travesti* actor who suffers a painful sex-change operation. The setting is a *travesti* theatre, and several episodes take place in India and China. The *travesti* theater mirrors the Cuban burlesque theater which was known to be notorious in Havana for its vulgarity. In the novel, however, this space becomes a place of transformation generated by desire. Desire and death are the two main elements that

bring about transformations. The distance and the strangeness of “Oriental” culture make deception possible, as much the result of desire as of death, which is a projection of an intensely metaphoric version of the Shanghai theater.

In Loti, *taverna* is the equivalent of the burlesque theater. It is a place of utmost coexistence where the people of Constantinople with different social, ethnic and sexual identities carouse together. *Köçeks*, young dancer boys dressed in women’s clothes, are the cardinal representatives of deception and desire in these spaces of encounter. The protagonist Loti disguises himself at night and seeps into these performative, abundant, baroque underworlds, which Sarduy himself describes as follows: “[...] el festín barroco nos parece, con su repetición de volutas, de arabescos y mascarar, de confitados sombreros y espejantes sedas, la apoteosis del artificio, la ironía e irrisión de la naturaleza. La mejor expresión de [...] la artificialización (J. Rousset)” (Barroco 168). In this *trompe-l’œil*, movement, dynamism, contradiction, and ambiguity operate together and break the barriers between the text, author and the world.

### Transgressing/dressing Baroque Aesthetics

“¿Bajo que categorías podemos situar al Severo viajero?” (2008: 75) asks François Wahl. It is hard to define Sarduy as his works transgress and blur the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, as well as reality and fantasy. Harking back to the Argentine poet Nestor Perlongher who defines the nomad as the person in-between, I would like to situate Sarduy as a territorial and linguistic nomad. This is mainly because the very act of crossing boundaries and cross-dressing plays a central role in his writerly aesthetics. Furthermore, Sarduy himself is a cross-dresser. One can best see the reflections of this in *De donde son los cantantes*, where he actively disguises his characters and vests their language to saturate physical and linguistic barriers. By way of incorporating neobaroque aesthetics, he perpetually moves away from the *Center* and differs meaning. In this sense, Sarduy’s cross-dressers from the Orient are queer(ing) hermeneutic workers who demystify and baroquify propagandas of normalization. They avail themselves of baroque illusionism, the distinctive baroque awareness of the kinship between appearance and reality, in which self-evident certainties are unmasked as fabrications and lies. The utopic space of possibilities that enables the realization of these baroquifying endeavors is the “Orient” both in Sarduy and Loti. Within this panorama, traveling means welcoming unknowability and becoming unknown. Travel awakens all possible forms of being the *other*, and the Orient is the locus of this experience. In a similar fashion, Loti meditates as follows in *Aziyadé*: “Quelque chose comme de l’amour naissait sur ces ruines, et l’Orient jetait son grand charme sur ce reveil de moi-meme, qui se traduisait par le trouble des sens”<sup>28</sup> (10).

I would like to close my discussion with a circular motion by going back to the epigraph I used in the opening: “Ir más allá es un regreso.” “Going further is a return.” Likewise, going to the “East” is always a return to the “West,” and cruising towards the *other* is always a cruise towards the self. This baroque motion is also inscribed in our daily lives, where we dress and cross-dress ourselves everyday as part of our identity performances or identities-as-performances.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I consulted Edward D'Auvergne's *Pierre Loti: Romance of a Great Writer* (2002) and Yves La Prairie's *Le vrai visage de Pierre Loti* (1995) for my biographical summation of Loti.
- <sup>2</sup> I draw on Tzvetan Todorov conceptualization of the "exotic" found in *Nous et les autres* (1989). According to him, the "exotic" is more a formulation of an ideal than a critique of the real.
- <sup>3</sup> César A. Salgado is a scholar who worked extensively on (neo)baroque literature as well as Sarduy. Therefore, I would like to hark back to his succinct explanation of this multilayered term here: "The term baroque was first used to designate a stylistic period of extravagant artificiality and ornemantation in post-Renaissance European art and literature, and to characterize the doctrinal and iconographic strategies of Counter-Reformation" (1999: 317). Around the early 2000s, however, the term baroque has come to describe particular instances of Latin American cultural alterity in the discourse of what Salgado calls "New World baroque theory." As he explains, the baroque, within this discourse, "functions as a trope or adjective for the region's complex ethnic and artistic *mestizaje* (racial mixture) rather than as a reference to exclusively Western cultural forms" (*ibid.*).
- <sup>4</sup> Further biographical information about Sarduy can be found in the *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture* under the entry "Sarduy, Severo (1937–1993)."
- <sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, Barthes, who was Sarduy's tutor at College de France, had already written extensively on Loti before Sarduy did. In fact, Barthes was known to be the French poststructuralist who followed Loti's steps in writing about the "East," and in particular Japan. Though these nuances fall outside this paper's focus, I think that it is still important to keep them in mind to understand Sarduy's orientalist gestures.
- <sup>6</sup> "This Cuban who travels through the East and disguises himself as an Oriental is a contemporary of the French May and the hippies." (my trans.)
- <sup>7</sup> Much has been said about Sarduy's Oriental journeys. Julia Kushigian's work *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: In Dialogue with Borges, Paz and Sarduy* (1991) is one of the earliest studies that touch upon the orientalist vein of Sarduy's texts. A more recent and extensive study on this topic is the book called *El Oriente de Sarduy* (2008). Though it illuminates numerous overlooked points, it still leaves out the Sarduy-Loti connection I'm looking at in this paper.
- <sup>8</sup> This is an ironically jocose expression by Sarduy to refer to Cuba's three existing cultures/ethnicities. In a note at the end of *De donde son los cantantes*, he writes: "Tres culturas se han superpuesto para constituir la cubana—española, africana y china tres ficciones que aluden a ellas constituyen este libro" [Three cultures, at least, have been superimposed to constitute the Cuban—Spanish, African, and Chinese—; three fictions alluding to them constitute this book] (1993: 154). Thus, Sarduy's Cuba was Europe, Africa, and Asia at once. The expression in question is also the title of a story by Sarduy that appeared in *Revista Sur* printed in Buenos Aires (1965: no. 297).
- <sup>9</sup> My emphasis.
- <sup>10</sup> *tebdil-i kıyafet* derives from Arabic *tebdil* (to change) and *kiyāfet* (attire).
- <sup>11</sup> In "Change of Attire, Conversion, and Apostasy" (2012), Irvin Cemil Schick provides a detailed account of the historico-religious background of *tebdil-i kıyafet* in the Ottoman society.
- <sup>12</sup> "The Orient of Darío, or Lugones' vague Orient, or the Orient of Neruda, or even the Orient of Lezama are a bit bibliographic, despite the fact that Neruda was in Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia." (my trans.)
- <sup>13</sup> "The orientalism of the French, let's say the nineteenth century, is also bibliographic." (my trans.)
- <sup>14</sup> "Sure, sure, that too. As is well known, Pierre Loti, for example, works more with a paper code, as Roland Barthes said, and with the National Library, as with Jules Verne, than with the real Orient." (my trans.)
- <sup>15</sup> "I owe [my understanding of] the Orient to Octavio Paz, in this sense. I mean, he is the first of the Occidentalists. As a Mexican, he was already very close to love that culture, I think." (my trans.)
- <sup>16</sup> "The baroque, superabundance, overflowing cornucopia, lavishness and waste — hence, the moral resistance that has aroused in certain cultures of economics and moderation such as the

- French — ridicule of all functionality, of all sobriety, is also the solution to that verbal saturation, to the *trop plein* of the word.” (my trans.)
- <sup>17</sup> “The Orient represents something more than a scientific object or a tourist destination: it is the very possibility of building new relationships between coincidence, language and the world.” (my trans.)
- <sup>18</sup> “the possibility of founding another civilization by shedding the tight Judeo-Christian corset.” (my trans.)
- <sup>19</sup> “Loti is in the novel [...]; but he is also outside of it since the Loti who wrote the book does not coincide with the hero Loti.” (my trans.)
- <sup>20</sup> “the fundamental inadequacy of language and reality.” (my trans.)
- <sup>21</sup> “utopias of language.” (my trans.)
- <sup>22</sup> “The transvestite does not imitate the woman. For him, at the limit, there is no woman, he knows—and perhaps, paradoxically, he is the only one to know it—that she is an appearance, that his kingdom and the strength of his fetish hides a defect [...] The transvestite does not copy: he rather simulates, since there is no norm that invites and magnetizes the transformation, that decides the metaphor: it is rather the inexistence of the pampered being that constitutes the space, the region or the support of that simulation.” (my trans.)
- <sup>23</sup> This essay can be found in *Escrito sobre un cuerpo* (*Written on a Body*).
- <sup>24</sup> Sarduy argues that the *curriculum cubense* is what constitutes Cuba as a fiction (See Footnote 5 for the original quote).
- <sup>25</sup> “That wine made of viceroyalty provinces, ennobled generations of traffickers and slave traders. They are looking for an impossible, for sure, but they are very well equipped. They beg notices for gambling dens and beehives—the Malaga brothels—in those cells, apocryphal, cartomantic, celestian beggars bribe black princesses. Houris from Maghreb harems, badly castrated eunuchs respond to them with their contralto voices.” (my trans.)
- <sup>26</sup> “Black soldiers and eunuchs kept these forbidden entrances. The styles of these porticoes themselves seemed to indicate that the threshold was dangerous to cross; the marble columns and friezes, excavated in the Arab style, were covered with strange designs and mysterious windings.” (my trans.)
- <sup>27</sup> “a mysterious little apartment where he could lock himself up to dream of Stamboul.” (my trans.)
- <sup>28</sup> “Something like love dawning on ruins, and the East cast its great charm on this awakening of myself, which resulted in the disturbance of the senses” (my trans.)

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# The ‘Imagined Author’: Contingent Selves in an Anonymous Life Writing Subreddit

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**Abstract:** In a small corner of Reddit, with just 4,000 followers, a subreddit called “life stories” demonstrates the rich possibilities of life writing beyond the strict purview of identity markers. When considering how little we know about those individuals who post, an interesting set of questions arise about identity, authenticity, and authorship. What is known begins and ends with the texts themselves, and thus an “imagined author” (Das and Pavlířková) emerges. Using narratives-in-interaction research (De Fina and Georgakopoulou), we examined forty well-engaged posts within the “life stories” subreddit to track the negotiations of meaning and identity within the writings and their responses. What emerges is not different from other digital life writing—confessions, vignettes, and reminiscences—but the level of intimacy and intensity does appear to rise.

**Keywords:** Imagined author, small stories research, anonymous life writing, identity and erasure, Reddit, contingent identity, digital confession

## Introduction

The instinct to tell one’s story from behind a cloak of obscurity is ancient. However, the digital version of that cloak has changed the dynamic of anonymous and pseudonymous life writing. From instant interactivity to the collapsed context of time and space (Wesch) to the always precarious nature of anonymity when conducted in “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff), the complexities are enormous. Still, the instinct to share life narratives in anonymized digital spaces is one of the constants of the nascent Internet’s history (e.g., FML, Texts from Last Night, If You Find This Mail). So, what is special about that form of life writing? This essay describes how we examined a small but regularly used subreddit called “Life Stories” to study that question. When considering how little we know about those individuals who post, an interesting set of questions arise about identity, authenticity, and authorship. What is known begins and ends with the texts themselves, and thus an “imagined author” (Das and Pavlířková) emerges. Much like an imagined audience, the space for co-constructed narrative and character, thus identity, appears to be limitless. However, as these posts are augmented with affirmation, questions, reflections, and advice by a second set of authors whose identities are also submerged, the very nature of contingent identities becomes apparent for their malleability and vulnerability to interpretation. Using narratives-in-interaction research (Defina and Georgakopoulou), we set out to examine forty well-engaged posts within the Life Stories subreddit to track the negotiations of meaning and identity within the writings and their responses.

After describing the literature that shaped our questions and analysis of the site, we describe our sample of stories and interactions and draw conclusions about what is notable about sharing life narratives in a digital space that affords various obscurity levels for the individual sharing the story.



## Identity and Erasure

Understanding the nature and meaning of digital identity is fraught work, both for researchers and users. For those sending messages of their lives, the context in which they insert themselves is collapsed, which “does not create a total void but a chaotic version of its once-ordered self” (Wesch 22). The affordances for shaping a self in digitality result in possibilities such as pure fiction or creating an idealized self or a more authentic and traceable existence. One way to make sense of this chaos is to think about a distinction N. Katherine Hayles made between inscription and incorporation of a digital being (246). While inscription exerts technological control over a self (from filters and photoshopping to deep fakes), incorporation attempts to leave the context of the embodied self intact.

Meanwhile, who receives the message, when, where, on what device becomes a tangle of cues and conditions for acceptance. Even beyond the profound complications of bots, deep fakes, and scammers, the challenges of understanding another human being’s digital presence are significant. Much reception in digital spaces mirrors a parasocial experience (Giles), a one-way relatedness reflecting celebrity culture. The experience of copresence (Campos-Castillo and Hinton), on the other hand, both shape individual behavior and force message receivers to negotiate the personae of other digital beings (Barbour et al.). We might feel comfortable navigating all the cues of digital identity. However, the verifications for who is speaking, what is real, who is listening, and what has meaning are all tenuous.

In an ecosystem such as Reddit, anonymity relieves certain strains on the “face work” that Goffman defined for human interaction. Until there are real-world implications of the speech on such a platform (Humphrey), the identities of the individuals shrouded by avatars and pseudonyms are less significant than what they do and say within the platform. Here, the possibility of an “identity playground” emerges, as Kafai et al. explain it. “The adoption of ‘face-work’ in the context of avatar creation highlights the interplay between individual agency...and social structures, i.e., the constraints imposed by community expectations that impact the representation of oneself” (26). Identity play introduces new pressures, a phenomenon that did not begin with the Internet.

Using literary Latin texts from the Roman imperial period as contextual standpoints, Tom Geue contends that anonymity should not be viewed “as a paralyzing lack, but as a constitutive effect of the text, and enabling force fundamental with the way it works” (5). We are mainly adopting Geue’s use of the term “anonymity,” which is quite broad and includes authors who did not make a conscious effort to be anonymous. Geue’s overarching message is that the force of anonymous authorship is double-edged. While anonymity can infer timeless universality, since all identifying contextual information has been stripped, the practice can also lead to erasure. On the other hand, Traister and Starner remind us that texts with no authorial information can teach us a lot about the expectations of readers and authors as consumers and composers of anonymous works, respectively.

The erasure of the author is not the only concern. Hlavach and Freivogel note that the “spontaneous, freewheeling nature of the internet” (28) gives individuals unhindered access and the opportunity to post on online platforms impulsively. They argue that by choosing the anonymity route, the anonymous poster is withholding a vital part of the truth: their identity, an important piece of information that can help readers fathom motivation and credibility. Phillips and Milner, on the other hand, make the point that this is not simply a choice but an affordance of digitally mediated spaces (88). Moreover, such systems create profound ambiguities, as the intentions of the messages (from extremism to satire) are left unknown. However, anonymity is not the safeguard many users assume it will be: “the same tools that allow you to construct your mask *just so* also allow others to take

your mask from you and do with it whatever they please" (96–97), which is to say that the playground is filled with multiple motivations, perspectives, desires, means and ends. This is exacerbated by what Zuboff has termed "surveillance capitalism," which "unilaterally claims human experience into free raw material for translation into behavioral data" (8). A pervasive, secretive, and relentless monitoring constantly pressures not only anonymous activity but all activity, and ultimately all digital privacy. Constructing a narrative of the self in such a space, much like the space of offline life, is not done in a bubble and does not release the offline author from all consequences. How narratives emerge still relies heavily on interaction.

### **Narratives-in-(Anonymous) Interaction**

Understanding life narratives as both the producer and sustainer of experience (Bruner 708) and identity (McAdams) has had a long, if uneven, run. Whether we are *homo narrans*, Fisher argues, or not, the pervasive elements of narrative that Burke laid out nearly 80 years ago still capture our imaginations as we decode our lives and the lives of others. However, the strict adherence to canonical definitions of a story does not align easily with either everyday living or digital relationality. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou turned away from what they referred to as the "narrative cannon" in favor of "aspects of situated language use, employed by speakers/narrators to position a display of situated, contextualized identities" (378). Rather than a narrative structure defining a life story, those who engage with the storyteller do so. This "small stories" or narratives-in-interaction perspective allowed space for narrative research within the contingent, sometimes incoherent, and quotidian expressions of social media, which Georgakopoulou and many other researchers have extended over the past decade-plus. As Page helpfully explains, "Small stories are characterized by fluidity, plasticity, and open-endedness, usually occurring in the small moments of talk, rather than as distinct, fully-fledged units" (426).

Georgakopoulou has created categories for how such interactions take place in digital spaces. Her concept of "narrative stance taking," for instance, describes the inception point of a small story chosen by the user to signal the act of storytelling that will grow, change, and merge into other narratives by way of interaction from other users (23). This is not always a peaceful process, as DeFina and Georgakopoulou explain because narratives can be contested, "both in the portrayal of events and characters and in the interaction with co-participants in social encounters" (113), which can result from a shared experience or what Fisher calls the "truth qualities" of a story (349).

In addition, as Pappacharissi has pointed out, affect plays a critical role in digital narratives, in connecting and disconnecting through the expression of sentiment (311). The role of affect, then, is to create a strong condition for acceptance or rejection and thus to engage in the narrative being told. This engagement is essential, especially for those who narrate their lives in anonymity, often in the light of confession. It is the only way a storyteller is "seen."

### **Digital confession**

While confession in digital spaces is not always anonymous, the feeling of distance between the confessing self and the public self allows certain confessions to emerge. Birnholtz et al. note that platforms that allow anonymous communication in terms of question-asking and confessions afford individuals the opportunity to explore their identity, discuss taboo topics, divulge details about themselves that they would rather have kept a secret, and ask questions that may lead to stigmatization if their identities were known. Furthermore, the authors make a distinction between stigma and taboo; they note that taboo is "an uncomfortable topic for discussion" while stigma "is something that reflects

on the person” (2615). Their study discovered that despite anonymous platforms being “hotbeds of negativity and cyberbullying,” students did not refrain from asking questions that border on taboo and reveal their potentially stigmatized identities (2621). Also, the authors report that they saw very few instances of negativity in the way responders commented and responded to questions; they gave valuable comments and provided relevant responses to questions posed instead.

While comparing the anonymous site Whisper with the named platform Twitter, Correa et al. found stark differences. Not only were language choices different—Whisper users tend to use more “personal, social, and informal words” than Twitter users (72). The study also found that Whisper users “express more negative emotions related to sadness and anger, and they communicate more wants, needs, and wishes than tweets” (72). The veil of anonymity, then, creates a dynamic that is likely different for the producers of narratives. Nevertheless, a similar effect is at work for the audience.

### Imagined Author

A good deal of social media research has focused on the “imagined audience” of those who produce. However, less work considers the “imagined author.” This is germane to all posts on social media and beyond. “The increasing number of widely circulating user-generated texts raises the question of whether and how the source or the origin of those texts matters to their ultimate readers; and how does the notion of the author co-determine the process of interpretation?” (Pavlíčková 31–32). To better understand that question, Pavlíčková used a hermeneutical approach to gain insight into a reader’s agency in meaning-making, which is significant but not broad enough. A dialogue between the reader and text ensues, and the text’s signifiers for its author’s identity are crucial elements of this interaction. Out of this concept, she developed the *imagined author*, “suggesting that the reader’s interpretation of the text is co-determined by the reader’s image of the author” (33).

Out of these determinations comes a culture of contingent identity, negotiated on both sides of the production-consumption dance, which is not binary on a platform like Reddit because the roles morph and flip throughout the interaction. The audience’s interpretation can be just the beginning of a narrative-in-interaction, with affordances such as upvotes, downvotes, and comments. Audiences can become the primary author, stories, and ebb and flow in importance; votes can amplify or mute a story, all while another set of invisible audiences watches.

### Research questions

Based on the literature above, we developed the following research questions:

#### *Narrative Stance taking*

- What narrative themes do emerge on the Life Stories subreddit?
- What role does affect play in the narratives, and are particular emotions dominant?
- Is there an element of open-endedness to the narratives, or do stories have finality to them?

#### *Audience Engagement and Imagined Author Probing*

- Is there a kind of common digital citizenship among users of the life stories subreddit; do users have high or low karma points?
- What elements of engagement emerge in audience responses to the narrative in trying to co-construct the imagined author?
- How do audiences use affect to match the narrative or demonstrate alliance, connection, and understanding?

### Narratives-in-interaction

The narratives-in-interaction framework (DeFina and Georgakopoulou) guides this study. It thus seeks out both the act of narrative stance taking and the interactions that subsequently accrete the narratives shared in collective spaces, both offline and online. The purpose of this kind of research is to consider multiple contexts around stories that are often underrepresented (as they emerge in conversations, for instance), rather than simply focusing on the classical definition of storytelling: “It affords an intimate view of what is going on in the here-and-now of any narrative interaction firmly locating us in the flow of everyday lived experience” (382). As it applies to social media, that baseline does not change significantly. As Georgakopoulou argues:

Small stories research, having developed tools for examining fragmented, transposable, and atypical stories, is well-placed to provide a sound methodological basis for exploring stories on social media, in particular for interrogating what is distinctive about them, but also how they draw on or depart from other forms and practices of storytelling (*Small Stories Research* 269).

What creates the broader context in small stories research on social media is the attention paid to the narratives themselves and the affordances that enable both the story’s inception and the responses that grow the narrative. Georgakopoulou suggests three interrelated layers to understand narrative interactions with a social media realm: 1) ways of telling; 2) sites where the stories are told; 3) tellers, in the broad sense of interacting communicators (270).

In the case of our study, Reddit highly affects the *ways of telling*, the choices made by both the user who tells the life story and their responders. Reddit allows users to post brief or long stories and multiple paratexts, including an avatar, a username, links to take people to users’ histories, up and downvotes, and comments. The culture of Reddit, especially with the emphasis on anonymity, also highly affects the tellers. This approach is not without complications, Georgakopoulou admits, mainly because the interactions take place out of the “context” in which most human interaction has been accustomed before digital life.

A prime challenge is to explore how interaction evolves when multiple participants tune in at different time zones and with different degrees of familiarity with the original poster. These interactions can either be with friends with whom there are multiple conversations across media or with strangers and ‘de-individuated’ users whose offline, demographic identities cannot possibly be established (271).

Very few places reveal this challenge quite so well as Reddit. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the texts and paratexts as interactions on their own, rather than extrapolating their meaning for the offline users that the texts murkily imply. We used a purposive sample of forty posts across seven years. We chose the stories based on at least some engagement varying both large and small numbers of comments and upvotes, variety within the titles to ensure a broad set of story possibilities and ensure we were not examining the same author twice.

After building the sample, we analyzed the texts for the ways of telling (themes of the stories, interactions within the comments by users and authors, and the nature of the stories’ closure—whether it was open-ended or not) the site of the stories (affordances such as upvote, downvote, the variety of avatars, the use of anonymity, and the tellers (contexts about the authors found within the stories, their avatars, the usernames, previous Reddit use, and in follow-up comments).

After analyzing the data separately, we discussed the findings to identify the confluences in our analysis and any disagreements. After discussing the findings, we created themes of what we agreed was the most pertinent phenomenon, guided by the research questions.

### **Cloak and confession on Reddit**

We found the following themes emerge about anonymous life writing on a platform such as Reddit.

#### *Identification*

One of the first themes that emerged was how anonymous authors define themselves. Anonymous authors defined themselves by their age, sexuality, gender, level of education, social status, place of residence, position in the family, race, occupation, relationship status, how long they have been using Reddit, and rarely, their real names. At times authors stated their ages blatantly; some others did not. However, we figured out their age range by piecing together other contextual information from their stories, including when they graduated high school or college. For example, in one of our samples, the anonymous author first states that "... when I was in 3rd or 4th grade my parents decided to migrate to Texas" and states further as they proceed in the storytelling that "I just want to say this when we migrated to the USA back in 1999 or 2000s ..." (Entrepreneur\_Guy92). In this case, we could estimate their age range by drawing inferences from the year they were in 3rd or 4th grade.

Still, the authors themselves often drop more than one marker of identity in their stories. While opening their story, a user mentions that "I am 44 years old. I grew up in an abusive home, and I left an abusive husband in 2014" (LonelyEliza).

Besides, to lay sufficient contexts for their stories, some anonymous authors often divulge information about their family members – parents, grandparents, siblings. As one author mentioned, "My father was a Private in the British Army and was a Pioneer, he served 2 tours of Afghanistan. My mother was a stay at home mum and is truly amazing" (itsmello1984).

#### *Intimate revelations*

The most prominent themes on the life stories subreddit are family, assault, abuse, suicide, relationships, pain, abandonment, hurt, sex, loss, parenthood, and depression. These are generally the themes that gain the most engagement, including upvotes and comments. Authors in the life stories subreddit exploit the cover of anonymity to express their deepest fears, confess their atrocities, ask uncomfortable questions, or reflect on their troubled past or present life situations, as the example narrative below shows:

When I was in Jr high, I had sex with my teacher. I redid the 8th grade 3 times due to attendance and "behavioral issues".

I just simply didn't want to be there. So because of those issues, the school put me on a special set of classes. I didn't switch classes like everyone else. My classmates and I stayed in one class with the same teacher all day. The only exception was lunch. We had 1 hour lunches with the rest of the kids on that lunch schedule. Now, because I redid the same grade 3 times, (2 of those school years I spent with the same teacher) we became close. He really inspired me to try and do the work. He taught me that an education is everything in this world. Ignorance doesn't get you anywhere (Conscious-Garbage-19).

In addition, many of the themes mentioned above coexist within stories. It was typical for themes of parenthood and abuse/assault, suicide, depression and pain, hurt and abandonment, to appear in the same context:

And this pandemic situation happened and these monsters became more violent. They started fighting every fucking day, morning evening night everyday. I have heard so many violent bad words that no one could tolerate.

And then I was literally fed up I yelled and had to physically fight them. Me being the quietest and the most decent kid in the whole vicinity had to raise my hand on my own

parents. This is like the utmost disgrace in an indian community. Me being the nicest guy did this sin which I can't remove this from my life forever.

And 2020 I was unemployed again. I did internship using my android mobile because I had no computer/laptop.

These monstrous parents and those events still haunt me to the date I can't tolerate this life (Kindly-Contract6223).

The ability to expose these realities at greater depth draws greater engagement and connects to more intense emotions that accompany these intimate tales.

### *Affect*

Certain emotions are dominant in the subreddit narratives. A thematic analysis of the data shows that anger, sadness, hurt, shame, confusion, despair, and fear – emotions that are rightly consistent with the themes that pervade the narratives as discussed above – feature prominently in the narratives. The anonymous authors use affect to establish basal connections with their intended audience and seek empathy. In the story example above, the author cautions readers not to judge them harshly because “until you’ve experienced something similar, you’d never be able to relate to it or truly empathize with it” (Conscious-Garbage-19). As this example shows, the author appeals to readers’ emotions to gain understanding and empathy, though more for the teacher than for themselves.

To appeal to readers’ emotions for the story they are about to narrate, another author, before diving into the details of their story, states that:

It's scary how similar other people's depressive thoughts are compared to mine in “r/depression” area in Reddit. Some of these posts can demonstrate [sic] *literally* word for word what I've written down in my negative-thoughts journal (we all have one, admit it), and it just makes me feel kinda of small. If this feeling of depression and utter useless is pretty common, then well frick, I'm not helping anyone by thinking or behaving the way I do (Raptlackey\_071).

By drawing parallels between their story, other authors’ stories, and their audiences’ life stories, this author leverages the traditional rhetoric concept of pathos to evoke sadness and sympathy in their readers.

### *Open-endedness vs. finality*

In general terms, it seems those who identify as older tell stories about specific situations in their past and confessions that have a tone of finality. Older anonymous authors seldom tell stories about what is happening to them at the moment to pose questions, seek validation, or solicit advice as a snippet below from the life story of a 50+ person from our sample shows:

I'll tell anyone that she is most likely the reason I am here today, and defiantly the reason I became the man I am. I have no doubt that without her coming into my life, I would have either been dead or locked up long before now. While it can be easy to find someone to die for; I can honestly say that I have someone I live for (Viking\_Tactical).

However, the stories of younger authors fall under two categories: Stories about things that have happened in their past and stories about pressing concerns they are dealing with currently. While stories about past issues and confessions told by some young anonymous authors close with a final tone like those told by older authors, young anonymous authors telling stories about current matters close their stories in an inconclusive manner. They either ask questions, seek advice, or exude a sense of ambivalence:

Since I do know from the start of the relationship that she certainly is ready for it. She said she is and that she doesn't want to wait any longer. Luckily I really had to go, for a good



reason. We want to meet each other tomorrow. I am helpless I feel under pressure. I don't know what I can say to her. I don't know how I can tell her, that I don't have any sexual interests at all. Just telling her the truth might make her feel that I am forced to be with her. But shall I always live with a lie? Does anybody out here have any kind of help for me? I am really sorry for the way to long text.

TL;DR How can I say to my not asexual gf, that I don't have sexual interests?

PS: Every kind of idea or maybe some experience would be really helpful. I really really love this girl. And I don't like it to lie to her (AmI\_Right).

Another author who notes that they are “a teen” as they begin the process of telling their story concludes in a similar manner:

But I'm afraid I'm going to turn out like my mom because I'm already been going through men that are like my dad. All my friends tell me that I will be ok and I will make my life better. They say I can make my life whatever I want it to be and I can be so much better than her.....Can I really? (AngelRoseheart).

We deduce first from this analysis that older anonymous authors are unlikely to narrate things that are happening to them at the moment, seek advice, or ask questions; instead, they tell stories about past issues and confess to previous transgressions. On the other hand, we categorize young anonymous authors into two; those who confess transgressions, like older authors, and tell readers about past issues, and those who talk about things happening to them at the moment to seek advice and validation or solicit help.

### Co-construction and acceptance

We categorized the elements of engagement that we see emerge into two: vertical and horizontal questions. Vertical questions are those comments/questions that circle back to the author; they are story-driving and author probing questions posed by readers directly to authors with the intent of gaining more context about the story they have just read.

After reading a story, for example, a reader with the username V8\_BLENDER asks the author a story probing question, “Hey man. This story for real?” to which the author replies, “It unfortunately is. My life has been one train wreck after another with no breaks” (JohnFett117).

On the other hand, typical author probing questions emerge in comments to the user Additional\_Ad\_8440's story. User justmovingmytoes asks, “bro u got it, you've been through so much i can tell u are a tough man! u gna make it, I just know that. btw what do u do for living?” to gain more context about Additional\_Ad\_8440's life and narrative. Another reader, frankOpeters, comments and asks:

Which state are you in currently? Because the first thing I was say is that you should try to get some financial stability. I know it's easier said than done. Get on food stamp if possible. If you don't even have a permanent address to live then go to a Church and ask for help. Tell them you are willing to do any type of work. If if they say no, be polite and build connection. You never know who might help. Also if the state have Medicaid, apply for that as well. Since sooner or later you might need some medical attention if you do physical labor. Go to the local library if you need to access the computer.

BTW how old are you now?

The author circles back by responding, “I build cabinets for the time being and install them into people's houses and stuff I used to do landscaping and pipeline work” and “Nah I work and everything I'm in oregon now I'm 23 though” to both questions respectively.

However, with horizontal questions/comments, readers take the core story and apply it to themselves or spring up conversations/debates about the story among themselves. The example below typifies how readers re-narrate the teller's story by applying it to themselves:

I'm coming up on 40 myself and feel like I don't have anything to show for it. I battle depression DAILY. Until this week I hadn't left my house in over 6 months. I get horrible anxiety at the thought of it. You aren't alone. I'm right here with you. Our issues may be different but we're very alike. I'm also female and feel like I have to start my life over, however I don't have the courage to. You're doing better in that respect. Instead of becoming a functioning part of society I'd rather crawl under a rock indefinitely. I'm working on it but the work is hard (flowers\_followed).

While debating the truth value of a story, a reader responds to the author thus:

"The mental image of your wife under your arm kicking and screaming (whilst you're rolling your eyes and apologising for the fuss to bystanders - dunno if that happened or not, but it'd be funny if it did) just brought one hell of a smile to my face. Thank you for sharing this pal <3" (caraar12345).

In the same vein, another reader responds to a story by commenting, "Your own fault for allowing your yearbook to be collected" (dominant\_driver) to spring up another conversation about the story and push it beyond its current state.

### *Nonjudgement, connection, and space*

Beyond ascertaining the veracity of a story, the comment sections predominantly lean toward expressions of camaraderie, connection, and understanding rather than judgment. Audiences ask further questions based on the stories that authors share. They express empathy by speaking positive words of encouragement, providing advice, and extending the stories by telling their own stories to match the affect emanating from shared stories in the life stories subreddit, which often looks like acts of narrative solidarity.

To comfort an author, one reader comments, "*hug* Keep holding onto hope. You've survived so much so far, don't let this girl get you down too much. It seems like a very silly thing for her to stop talking to you because you were anxious about losing her friendship" (QuirkyMagpie).

Advising an author who solicits, another reader replies, "No, he should respect your feelings. Your thoughts are rational. Young boys mistake niceness for flirting when they're hopeful" (PointlessGrandma) to comfort and advise the author.

The commenters take cues from authors as well. In the case of the student who confesses sleeping with their teacher, a strong cue of accepting the teacher's actions reflects in the responses. Commenters did not make judgmental comments, and the author is praised mainly for the openness of the story.

Another theme we found was a lack of identity-probing. While there are examples of asking questions about identity, it almost always serves the story's context. Such acts seem to uphold the ethic of the subreddit, and perhaps the platform as a whole, to allow for optimal anonymity in the service of honest tellings.

### **Contingent texts in action and identity**

Despite the complexities mentioned in the article's opening and the opportunity for freewheeling chaos that comes with anonymity, what we discovered in the Life Stories subreddit was more intimacy and confession than reticence or hyperbole. It appeared that need and care were more prevalent than image-bolstering or moralizing condemnation. This gives the contingency of identities a different shape than we expected.

Still, what gets read and what does not, how the engagement affects the narrative, and the narrator's place is all vulnerable to interaction or non-interaction. Anonymous authors on the subreddit take advantage of the culture that has emerged to share stories that could lead to stigmatization and to ask uncomfortable questions. Confessions and taboo stories

like this, if shared on named platforms, could lead to arrests and shaming, as well as the more positive instincts we found here. The cloak of anonymity on the Reddit platform makes anonymous authors comfortable sharing these stories with little or no fear of the more negative reprisals.

This broader realm of acceptance gives the story new meanings. Acceptance reorders or reaffirms normative moral values, depending on the story. Confession appears to present vulnerabilities that, once engaged, are shared, and sometimes ameliorated. All of this led us to believe that we were observing a classic example of Berlant's "intimate publics," strangers who develop intimacies through the sharing of texts, which is fueled mainly by affect, as Papacharissi suggests. However, this is not to argue that no norms existed. It was rare to find highly engaging stories in which storytellers portrayed themselves as perpetrators harming others, especially those with less power. Given that, it is possible to assume that storytellers established standards of acceptance over time.

Commenters play an influential role in developing the story's meaning, often shaping the narrator's identity as well, but by their actions and speech rather than their external, recognizable traits. From the perspective of a "second" audience—those reading without engaging—the commenters often become just as essential authors in the narrative. So perhaps we might extend Pavlícková's concept of "imagined authors" to the texts themselves—the actions, the images, the meanings, and even the interactions. The texts create a "face," the context, and the relational elements that lead to an intimate public. The imagined authors may be the inception of one element of the textual body, but, taken together, no storytelling agent stands alone, and no more details about the external person are necessary for the story to hold meaning. Once engaged, no one agent could promise a definitive conclusion to the texts, even those who told closed-ended stories. The possibility of augmentation always awaits. So, the verifiability of the story is not germane—we can see the story emerge before us. Moreover, stripping these stories of the authors' and other characters' names removes nothing from understanding those stories. We realize that names and contingent identities accompanying them give way to a contingency of experience as the core identifier.

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# Fiction or Fictional Life Stories? Reading Qurratulain Hyder's *Beyond the Stars and Other Stories* against her Life Writings

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FATIMA RIZVI

**Abstract:** *Sitaron se Aage* (*Beyond the Stars*) is Qurratulain Hyder's earliest collection of Urdu short stories, published in 1947. Hyder translated or transcreated much of her fiction into English but she didn't revisit this collection. It troubled me that since it was unavailable in English, Anglophone readers would never know about these youthful stories and so I decided to translate them. Now that sufficient biographical material is available on/by Qurratulain Hyder, I recognized in the process that several stories are in fact, autobiographical. Hyder was weaving fiction based on personal life experiences. The stories are set in places she grew up; institutions where she studied are centralized; activities she indulged in are incorporated as she reminisces her childhood and adolescence; her political and philosophical leanings become apparent. Significantly, she is present in several stories either as a character or as herself – a painter or a budding writer. One may also conjecture that this debut publication is her homage to her father. In this paper, I read the *Sitaron* . . . stories autobiographically based on Hyder's life writings, interviews and essays she has published, as well as films on her.

**Keywords:** Life writing, childhood, adolescence, youth, education, politics, music, painting

Qurratulain Hyder (January 1927 – August 2007) published her earliest collection of Urdu short stories *Sitaron se Aage* (*Beyond the Stars and Other Stories*) in 1947, just before migrating to Pakistan with her mother. Over time Hyder translated or transcreated most of her fiction. However, she did not revisit *Sitaron se Aage*. I decided to translate this collection with a view to bring it to Anglophone readers and to help develop a better understanding of this excellent writer and her art. Owing to the availability now, of sufficient life writings<sup>1</sup> I recognized that autobiographical and biographical elements are common to all the stories in *Sitaron*. This tendency to include biographical or autobiographical experiences or ephemera is common among writers across cultures but in *Sitaron*, several stories are fictionalized life stories and some are actually life stories. Young Hyder was weaving fiction around family, friends and acquaintances. She was employing stream of consciousness modes and/or interior monologues as veiling or masking devices. Written in all likelihood between 1944 and 1947, the stories are based on her personal experiences and set in places she grew up; institutions where she studied acquire prominence; activities she indulged in are incorporated and childhood and adolescent reminiscences become the stock material around which stories are spun. Hyder's comfortable way of life, reminiscent of a gone forever era and its many cultural allusions, her wealth of knowledge and her philosophical and socio-political orientations, though still nascent, are discernable. This paper reads *Beyond the Stars* . . . against Hyder's life writings to deliberate over her adolescence, relationships and friendships, education and learning, cultural and literary orientations and her evolving, political-cultural understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Hyder's father, Syed Sajjad Hyder 'Yildirim' (1880 – 1943) was a poet, essayist and playwright, a popular and prolific short-story writer. Her mother Nazar Sajjad Hyder (1892–1967) was a reputed novelist and short story writer. Educated, emancipated, liberal and modern, she championed women's causes and actively worked for reform. She participated in the non-cooperation movement, gave up purdah in 1920 and projected women like herself in her oeuvre. She served as honorary editor of the children's magazine *Phool*, published in Lahore. Hyder grew up in an illustrious, intellectually stimulating, erudite and anglicised but culturally rooted familial setup, where women's education and progress were matters of course. Regarding her Chacha Naseeruddin Hyder's family she writes that his wife, her Chachi, Waheeda Begum was fluent in English. Their daughters Azra, Zehra and Khalida or Achcho were brilliant students through school and college. They received graduate and post-graduate degrees with first-class from Aligarh, took up diploma courses at Lady Irwin College, Delhi, and Khalida went on to study abroad. Their sons Zaheer (Achche Mian) and Salahuddin (Pare Mian) were outstanding students who did exceedingly well for themselves (*Kaf-e Gul* 110).<sup>3</sup> More generally Hyder writes: "My convent educated female cousins read Jane Austen and Dickens. Young men quoted Karl Marx. A youthful family friend became one of the founder members of the Progressive Movement" ("Novel and Short Story": 208–209). The women in *Beyond the Stars*, drawn from among her cousins, relatives and friends, epitomise emancipated, modern, liberal, sophisticated and enlightened women who exercise agency in deciding the course of their lives. They are self-assured, accomplished, well-informed and politically conscious. They enjoy reading, painting, outdoor and indoor games, sports, music and dance, and evening outings; education is a way of life and professional qualification provides an edge. While several of them are quintessentially conservative, eager to marry and settle down to comfortable lifestyles, many more are contemporary, seek economic independence, contribute to the nationalist struggle for independence and try to affect positive changes in their environment.

Hyder is present in several stories either as a character or as herself, Ainie or Miss Hyder. Hyder was known as Ainie Apa or Ainie Khala or simply Ainie among friends, acquaintances and relatives. At home she was also called Bibi. Her presence among women of various dispositions as a painter, as a music and dance enthusiast and a budding writer, corroborates the autobiographical nature of these stories. As a character, she values reason over emotion, balks at young men who fawn over her and scorns young women who fall helplessly in love. In several contemplative, inward-looking stories Hyder writes about her anxieties as a young writer trying to find her feet or forge a style. In "A Worthless Office" for instance, she muses "*But Ainie, has it ever occurred to you that you always talk about the same old things – in other words, only about disillusionment?*" (72). In "We, the People" she jocularly disparages herself: "Now, I've started writing short stories and in every story, I find it essential to mention a Studebaker or a Packard" (92). In other stories she is concerned about individualism as a writer's pre-requisite; is comfortable in the thought that she writes differently from others, and is somewhat complacent that her career as a writer is burgeoning. This is particularly significant because *tarraqi-pasand* or progressive trends were dominant in Urdu during this time. The *Anjuman Tarraqi Pasand Mussamifin-e Hind* or All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA), Marxist-socialist in orientation, held its first meeting in Lucknow in 1936. The ensuing movement took Urdu literature by storm. The decade from 1937 to 1947 was of most abundant progressive literary output in almost all Indian languages. Hyder did not align with the Progressives, despite her awareness of all this. Several stories in *Beyond the Stars* feature activities of the Marxists and Hyder's own inability to conform to their political ideals. In "A Worthless Office" the protagonist is keenly conscious that Communist Party representatives face bleak and uncertain futures (83–84). In "I Hear there was an Alchemist in the Heavens"



one of the characters makes flippant, tongue-in-cheek remarks about a socialist cousin (38-39); "Stray Thoughts" has Hyder avow commitment to her bourgeois sensibility (115) and "The Gomti Flows On" contains lighthearted references to Progressive literature (169). The title story "Beyond the Stars" a narrative from the point of view of comrade Hamida, portrays a group of disillusioned Communist Party workers who keep up their spirits by singing, smoking, sleeping or reflecting *en route* a humdrum bullock-cart journey.

Hyder received much flak from the Progressives for expressing bourgeois sensibilities in the occasional stories published in literary magazines, for *Sitaron se Aage, Mere bhi Sanamkhan* (1949; Maktaba Jadeed, Lahore) or *My Temples, Too* and *Sheeshe ke Ghar* (Glass Houses, 1954) her second collection of short stories. Ismat Chughtai's essay "Pompom Darling" criticising her themes, characters and sensibility was unforgiving and disparaging. Hyder was heartbroken. "So quite unwittingly I became a controversial writer" (Preface xiii) she writes. And again:

I was first called a giggly schoolgirl, and then a bourgeoisie reactionary. I found it all very unfair and saddening. It was hard to explain what ingredients had gone into the creation of those stories and that first novel of mine. They were not the world's best fiction but when I re-read them now I realize that they were certainly different. Perhaps all that I felt and perceived had to be expressed differently.... The style comes with the theme and the environment. ("Novel and Short Story" 209)

Nevertheless, despite the controversies that raged around her, she stood her ground. Her relationship with the Progressives remained tenuous. Much later, she cited Iqbal to express her awkward position in relation to them: "*Khudawanda ye tere sada-dil bande kidhar jaaen*" ("God, where may your simple beings go?") (*Shahra-e Hareer* 318).

In "The Caravan Rested Here" a section of which is essentially autobiographical, Hyder writes that her family "laughed heartily" when she put away her brushes and began writing and adds that she had to defend herself staunchly before them:

"Uffo, just think— Bibi's well-known outside the household as a story-writer!" And there was always such a din at the dining table . . . "Now look at this — *Saqi* and *Adab-e Latif's Exquisite Literature* editors have written, asking for pieces for their annual issue." This was greeted with such hilarity that I wanted to cry! (160)

She adds that one evening when she announced that her stories were going to be published, nobody believed her. In fact, one of her Bhaijan's<sup>4</sup> friends remarked with absolute seriousness:

"Make sure you publish a detailed explanation along with them, so people can understand what you've written!" (160)

Several stories feature an amateur painter. "The Caravan Rested Here" gives indication retrospectively about Hyder's sense of the natural environment in Port Blair:

What a riot of colours there was! The dark blue and green sea; golden sands; grey cliffs; our kothis' red roofs, green clusters of coconut palms; orange sunlight reflected on waves that swept the shores; white seabirds and the white sails of our boats — there was colour all around us! Were I old enough, I would capture them on my canvas. As far as the eye could see, sunlight washed across brightly-hued poppies, like the rising of bright flames.

In "The Deodar Forest", the narrator paints nature under the deodars; in "A Worthless Office" Farida paints and her sister Asma is a writer; in "An Evening in Avadh" Zeenat cannot understand why the narrator paints instead of engaging in more worthwhile activities (122). As a young girl, Hyder enjoyed painting casually. She recalls how, much to her embarrassment, her mother showed her paintings to Syed Mohammad Oyama, the Indian-Japanese painter who visited them in Dehradun, and also sent her to learn painting informally with their neighbours. Hyder joined evening painting classes in the Arts School

with a friend, Premlata Grover, under the tutelage of L.M. Sen for a few months while studying for her MA in Lucknow. She couldn't continue the course because they were supposed to visit the University library around the same time. Striding two courses was difficult (*Andaz* 134-135).

Hyder had a good idea of war-time exigencies and contingencies. Her maternal grandfather Khan Bahadur Nazrul Baqar was a supply agent to the British Indian Army. He was in China during the Boxer rebellion, in South Africa during the Boer War, Burma during the Lushai War and spent four years in France during the First World War (Preface xii). On his return at the end of the war he was felicitated by the British government with a title and a jagir which he refused, reasoning that he had no use of it since his only son, the school-going Syed Mustafa Baqar had succumbed to cholera in Lucknow in 1916, while he was away at war (*Kaf-e Gul* 35). Young Hyder felt sensitively about the changes the Second World War wrought in her own country and the world at large. She writes:

The impact of World War II further changed the social landscape. During my college years I began writing about it all. I didn't tell my parents and the stuff began to appear in major literary magazines. ("Novel and Short Story" 209)

Almost all the stories in *Sitaron se Age* centre World War II overtly or laterally. Though only "I hear there was an Alchemist in the Heavens" describes war-front action in Germany, albeit in flashback mode, Hyder explores various aspects of the War – warfront deaths, destruction, disabilities, frustrations, deferrals of personal plans, enlisting, volunteering with the Red Cross and nursing wounded soldiers. Victory celebrations, lit up Hazratganj roads, thanksgiving service, the La Martiniere College boys' parade are all fictional representations of real-life events ("The Dance" 110). Most often, war thoughts or scenes are expressed in interior monologues. Hyder's protagonists, subconsciously aware of the War, express war-thoughts monologically, making the distant seem near and the past impinge upon the present.

Hyder's family and Muhammad Iqbal shared a close relationship. She narrates about Iqbal's travelling to Lucknow to condole the untimely death of her maternal uncle Mustafa Baqar and staying with them at their Hilton Lane residence. She writes half-humorously that Iqbal mistook a severe stomach infection he contracted after a sumptuous dinner hosted in his honour by the Raja of Mahmudabad, for cholera and was beside himself with worry. He was treated by the resident civil surgeon Colonel Birdwood who resided at Abbott Road and a Hakeem from Jhawai Tola. When he recovered, the Raja booked him a first-class ticket and arranged two attendants to wait on him on the return journey to Lahore. She adds that her father accompanied him too (*Kar-e Jahan* 220-222). In "The Caravan", Hyder writes, "I sat up with Abbajan till late at night, discussing Iqbal's poetry and a host of other worldly matters (161)." That these deliberations had palpable and long-lasting effects is evident in *Beyond the Stars* and her subsequent work. Several stories make direct or oblique references to Iqbal. In "Ah! O Friend," an intensely subjective and inward-looking story, essentially a recollection of miscellaneous thoughts, of people, places, events, activities and interests, conceived in stream of conscious mode, she recalls, in all likelihood, her father's exhortations to read Iqbal's *Asrar-e-Khudi* (*Secrets of the Self*) and *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi* (*Secrets of Selflessness*). "... immerse yourself in Iqbal, your understanding will improve a great deal..." (69) he advises. In "A Worthless Office" she incorporates Iqbal's couplet to propose a new world order:

Reduce to cinders this borrowed earth and sky  
And from its ashes create your own universe (74)

She borrows the first line of his couplet from the ghazal 'Mohabbat' ("Adoration") from *Baang-e Dara* (1924; *The Call of the Marching Bell*):

*Suna hai aalam-e-bala men koi keemiyagar tha  
Safa thi jis ki khak-e pa men barh kar saghar-e jam se* (Iqbal 189)  
I hear there was an alchemist in the Heavens

The dust of whose feet sparkled more than Jamshed's crystal globe (my translation)

to serve as the title of a story and quotes sections of the ghazal in it. Over and above, she titles her collection *Sitaron se Aage*, after a story bearing the same title. "*Sitaron se aage*" is the opening phrase of a ghazal from *Baal-e Jibril* (1935; *Gabriel's Wing*), a collection of poems composed mostly during Iqbal's student years in Europe.

*Sitaron se aage jahan aur bhi hain  
Abhi Ishq ke imtihan aur bhi hain* (Iqbal 640)<sup>5</sup>  
There are other worlds beyond the stars,  
yet other trials of love.

Several times she refers to the *Murraqqa-e Chughtai* (Chughtai's album) a selection of Ghalib's couplets, illustrated in Mughal and calligraphic style by Abdur Rahman Chughtai. Iqbal wrote the Foreword to the album and commended Chughtai's unique style.

Hyder writes about her adolescence and youth among friends, relatives and acquaintances, albeit imaginatively. Several stories contribute to the bioscope of memory of leisurely years in Port Blair, Dehradun, Lahore and Lucknow. Hyder spent her early childhood in Port Blair where her father was posted as Assistant Revenue Commissioner on the Andaman Islands. "The Caravan Rested Here" cherishes memories of these halcyon, sunny days among sights and sounds that afford pleasure. Hyder describes the "kothi".

...pretty, two-storeyed, Japanese style wooden buildings with red thatched roofs made with wood from the green jungles all around. On the lower level lived the guards who stood vigil over the kothi. Above the portico was the drawing-room with big windows facing the sea – all approaching ships could be seen from our windows. At night, far away on the horizon, the beam from the lighthouse glimmered.... At the bottom of our garden's slope, hidden behind a cluster of coconut palms, was Mr Jaspal's kothi. (157)

Interwoven are happy memories of a carefree childhood spent in the company of friends. Hyder recalls that Mr Jaspal's children, she and her brother, Nilofar and her two elder sisters, and the chief commissioner's daughter, Aizmee were the only children on the island. They played and fought all day long; swam, gathered sea-shells or made sand-castles in the evening and studied geometry and grammar at night. She adds that when her Abbajan and Uncle Jaspal were away at office and they were expected to study with their tutors, against our will, the telephone would be under siege! All manner of pranks were played on the unsuspecting tutors. Bedtime was at 8 pm, but Saturday and Sunday nights were gala nights because their parents were away at the Nicobar Island Club and returned rather late. As a safety measure the girls were all gathered together and Shakuntala or Aizmee took charge of them. They enjoyed themselves thoroughly, played hide and seek in dark rooms, in corridors or under stairways and sang so loudly that the piano's strings nearly cracked. Like all little girls she and Kamla and Vimla believed the world of their elder brothers who were studying at Colonel Brown's in Dehradun, across the sea. They all felt thrilled when the young men came home during summer or Christmas vacations (156-158). The story also stands testimony to friendships that withstood both the passage of time and distance. Hyder recalls that in India, she, Shakuntala, Vimla, and Kamla went to school at the convent in Dehradun.<sup>6</sup> After retirement, her Abbajan took up residence in Lucknow<sup>7</sup> with a view to providing for the children's first-rate education. Soon, Uncle Jaspal was transferred to Lucknow from Allahabad, and all the girls joined college, and then the University, and began attending their classes. As young women, Hyder writes, "we were very firm of mind" (160). She is full of admiration for her friends

who won accolades in academics and co-curricular activities at university and trained in dance at Uday Shankar's dance centre. Mr Balwant Singh Jaspal, closely connected with the royal family of Kapurthala, and Hyder's father were professional colleagues and good friends. Syed Sajjad Hyder took charge from him as Assistant Revenue Collector on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Their children kept up their friendship over the years in Dehradun and Lucknow. According to Hyder, Mrs Balwant Singh's Guru Mata predicted that Shakuntala would marry a Muslim. She married Anwar Jamal Kidwai. (*Kaf-e Gul* 94 and 127). Hyder writes that Kamla was brilliant and she looked up to her as a "guru" (*Zindagi-nama* 32). Years later, in the Preface to *The sound of Falling Leaves*, an essay recording stray childhood remembrances, Hyder writes:

One of my earliest memories is that of myself perched on shoulder of a Goan steward on the deck of *S S Maharajah*. We were on our way to the Andaman Islands. Port Blair is less hazy. A sprawling bungalow on stilts, Burmese and Punjabi servants, a private fire-engine downstairs. A sentry at the gate shouting from time to time *Haalt hukum sadar* which was the Urduised form of "Halt who comes there?" Father was assistant revenue commissioner of the islands where the notorious Cellular Jail had originally been set up for the rebels of the "Sepoy Mutiny". (v-vi)

In an interview for BBC Urdu, Hyder informs that they lived in the Andaman Islands for one year. She recalls that the ambience was "*pucca colonial*." Their domestic staff comprised convicts serving life term. Her father took a transfer because potable water was scarce and there wasn't any scope for education for her brother. From Port Blair the family moved to Ghazipur where the ambience was very East India Company. Life here was carefree; she read much and also began her readings in Urdu.

Hyder received preliminary, formal education in English schools in Dehradun, Aligarh, Lahore, and mostly in Lucknow, training in art and music at the same time. Since her father was on a transferable post, intermittently, she studied at home where she also read the Quran and studied Urdu under the tutelage of Maulvis. Hyder writes about her earliest experiences with a maulvi in "The Caravan":

We didn't know any Urdu at all. Abbajan was worried that (...) I'd turn out to be like an Anglo-Indian. Therefore many preparations were made to send for a red-bearded Maulvi Sahib from Calcutta, and I was issued an ultimatum: if I played any pranks on him I'd be held by my ears and packed off to Aligarh. This was such a powerful threat that I busied myself studying Urdu grammar and the Persian *Amadnama*. (157- 158)

*Beyond the Stars* deals with the relevance of knowing Urdu well or not knowing it well enough. In "A worthless Office" Hyder muses that her Urdu is weak because she always studied in convent schools and needs English expressions to overcome is deficiency (74-75). In "The Dance of a Spark" both Lalarukh and Kamaal concede that their Urdu is weak: "(Actually, I cannot speak good Urdu)... (What a pity! My Urdu isn't any better.)" (97); and in "I Hear there was an Alchemist in the Heavens" there is jousting between Sabiha and Asif about correct placement of the adverbial in a sentence (39).

Hyder took her High School examination from Banaras Hindu University. She cleared her Intermediate examination in 1941 from Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow and went on to get her BA degree from Indraprastha College, Delhi in 1945. She took an M A degree in English, from the University of Lucknow in 1947. Her readings in Urdu, Persian and English literature in her father's well-stocked library contributed largely to her literary consciousness and shaped her imagination. Through these years she studied classical music both formally at the Banaras Hindu University and Marris Music College and informally at home. Like her mother she played the sitar. She also studied western classical music at Isabella Thoburn College and learnt to play the piano. In Baker School, London she further honed her skill and continued to pursue her interest in Pakistan under

the guidance of a private tutor. Hyder's entire family had a keen interest in music and several cousins were fond of singing, her Bade Abba included. Her parents encouraged her to study music and her mother desired Muslim women to study music with a view to reform (*Andaz* 161-162). She employed resident ustads who taught her to play the sitar.<sup>8</sup> Some of Hyder's earliest memories include those of resident or visiting ustads who taught her mother and her cousins the sitar and/or the sarod. "Dalanwalla" narrates how studying music and dance became preoccupations not only in her household but the entire neighbourhood (38). Music and dance, both Indian and Western, particularly fusion music and fusion dance are instrumental to several stories in *Beyond the Stars*. For instance, in "Ah! O Friend", Hyder recalls Uday Shankar, his fusion of Indian and Western dance, his perfection and his India Cultural Centre near Almora which had to be shut down for want of funds; his wife Amla and their international acclaim. She recalls Ram Gopal and his success as a fusion dancer and his foray with films. Perhaps at the back of her mind are fond childhood memories of visits to Becket House, her Chacha Naseeruddin's residence in Almora, and of learning music and dance.

In "The Gomti Flows On", a transcreated, non-fiction account, possibly a rewriting of "Lekin Gomti Behti Rahi", a story in *Sitaron se Aage*, Hyder recalls that during the monsoon season soon after schools and colleges reopened, along with a few girls of "traditional as well as modern families of both communities" she learnt to play the tanpura in a school in an old mansion in Lal Bagh, run by a sightless "utterly old-world courteous, Kayastha Master Saheb", a graduate from Marris Music College (Bhatkande University) and his wife. She adds "...as I strummed the *tanpura*, Shakuntala Mathur started a *Malhaar – Mohammad Shah piya sada rangile – un bin jiya tarse. Rom jhom badarva barse...*" (*The Taj Magazine* 4-5). Hyder's depiction and the raga and are a replication of a portrayal in "We the people" in which the rains pour and Shakuntala Varshney sings a *Malhaar – Mohammad Shah piya sada ....*(93).

Isabella Thoburn College is a pulsating presence in several stories. Memories of college life are evoked repeatedly. The principles and values it promoted are imprinted on her young, impressionable mind indelibly; she is fascinated by its impressive building with its imposing Grecian pillars and it is quite evident that she has enjoyed her tenure there wholeheartedly. As a student who believed unreservedly in the eminence of her institution, Hyder very likely felt like a kindred spirit to all that it stood for. "The Gomti Flows On" centralizes life in Isabella Thoburn's Nishat hostel and includes a reference to Miss Sarah Chakko who was appointed professor at the college in 1943 and went on to become the principal.<sup>10</sup> The reader is introduced to a world of young men and women, the narrator's cousins and friends of diverse ethnic, cultural and political sensibilities, pursuing various careers. Misunderstandings and scandals are part and parcel of their lives. "Mona Lisa" reflects on the mysteries of life and pays homage to Hyder's years at Isabella Thoburn. In all likelihood, Hyder is looking back at these "exciting" years with a sense of nostalgic longing when she writes:

"Superb, my dear children, our rehearsal is doing fabulously!" said our French music teacher as she smiled a contented smile and walked out to stand in the imposing pillars' lengthening shadows on the veranda. Nishat closed the piano with similar composure. How exciting was life! Strains of 'La Boheme' echoed in the fading light and all around us our college's great buildings were gradually disappearing in the evening's darkness. *My dear college, one of the best colleges in Asia, an American college in Asia!* (135-136)

A mature Hyder reiterates that Isabella Thoburn College "was the finest college for girls in the entire East" (*The Taj Magazine* 5). The river Gomti, Qaisarbagh Baradari, Mayfair, Hazrat Ganj, University of Lucknow, the two La Martinere Colleges, India Coffee House, Moti Mahal Bridge, Hardinge Bridge and various monumental buildings – places of



bustling activity, festivity, gossip and scandal are central to Hyder's memory of growing up years and the cityscape of Lucknow.

Nostalgia and yearning for a time past, or days gone by haunt a few stories. There is in them a certain sadness stemming from, one presumes, the demise of her father who she loved dearly and who stood at the focal centre of her existence. His presence in absentia is perceivable in these. Perhaps, *Sitaron se Aage* is Hyder's homage to him. "Abbajan was my best friend!" she says in "The Caravan Rested Here" (161). In "Ah! O Friend" she is nostalgic about music lessons, dance practice and about happier days in Lucknow, Nainital, Almora and Mussoorie. In all likelihood her "friend" is her father. Very likely, this story was written while she was reading for her BA in Delhi. "The Deodar Forest" begins nostalgically with the protagonist reminiscing the past in juxtaposition with the present:

We still have our evening tea under the branches of the pear and apricot trees, bent low with heavily laden fruit, but I do not pluck apricots when Ammi isn't looking any more. In the valley below, the 9 o'clock train still meanders like it did before, but I no longer dart on an impulse to bid the travellers goodnight when I hear it approach, and nor do I feel the urge to run along and count the lights – these are all old, meaningless things now. (1)

"The Deodar Forest" and "Ah! O Friend" were first published in *Saqi*, the former in August, 1944 and the latter in April 1945. In all likelihood, they were written after her father's demise. Much had changed for the Hyderys by then. Hyder enjoyed warm relationships with her cousins, particularly her Chacha Naseeruddin's daughters. Khalida who was closest her age is in all likelihood, a major character in "The Deodar Forest". Going by the fact that the story is set in Dehradun, the landscape is similar to that of Dalanwalla where the Hyderys lived in a neighbourhood housing predominantly English residents and upper crust Indians;<sup>11</sup> it is narrated in the first person, by a narrator who is an amateur painter and the cousins are by themselves at home, one of them is studying home science at Lady Irwin College, a reader familiar with Hyder's life writings cannot help assuming that the story or elements of the story are autobiographical. Khalida catches a severe cold in the story. Hyder writes that as young girls, she and Khalida were prone to catching colds and both underwent tonsil surgeries under the supervision of their Chacha Waheeduddin (*Kar-e Jahan* 321). She also writes that their parents often travelled up and down Itawah, Nehtaur, Aligarh, Shahjahanpur and Dehradun by road or train, leaving the girls in the care of older cousins or relatives (*Kar-e Jahan* 322-323). This fact is featured in the story also.

Hyder celebrates the Yeatsian country house ideal where comfortable living is a way of life, and ordinary, everyday matters like evening tea or breakfast are ceremonious affairs, where want and deprivation are unknown, though not unheard. Like Yeats who expresses a strong sense of belonging to family, ancestry culture and even the materiality of the house and the comfort it affords in his poems (Reid 331), Hyder exhibits a strong affiliation to her familial background, her lineage and privileges that came with a well-heeled ancestry. Most of the stories in *Beyond the Stars* testify to this. Young men and women in Hyder's stories enjoy comfortable Anglicized lifestyles, tête-à-têtes over coffee, tea parties and music and dance; they dance the fox-trot, rumba, Lambeth-walk with as much zest as they do classical Indian dance. They delight in Hollywood films and revel in the glamour, charm and sophistication of Hollywood actors. Their interests are in fact, Hyder's own. Home is always a space that provides comfort, a space she celebrates as a place of belonging. In all likelihood, the young narrator of "Stray Thoughts" (113-115) who enjoys the warm coziness of a fire in her drawing-room hearth, sipping flavorful, aromatic coffee is Hyder. The narrator refers to her Chacha Mian who was away at the Viceregal Lodge attending a party and his son, selected for the Imperial Service, who introduces her to a young Marxist painter. Hyder's Chacha Khan Bahadur Syed Waheeduddin Hyder was a civil surgeon at



Shahjahanpur (1935) appointed honorary physician to Lord Willington and Lord Linlithgow (*Kaf-e Gul* 64 & 72). Chacha Mian in the story is very likely her own Chacha.

With regard to her early stories Hyder writes:

My take-off point was atmosphere – time, the twilight of the Raj. I began writing about a particular ethos – landed and service gentry, hill stations, neo-Georgian houses and dak bungalows in remote districts old feudal homes in rural areas and small towns. (“Novel and Short Story” 208)

Hyder didn't travel far to look for any of these. As regards the houses her protagonists occupy, one may assume that they are her own Ashiana in Dalanwalla, Baldeo in Mussoorie, 21 Faizabad Road in Lucknow; Beckett House in Almora; her Chacha Waheeduddin's residence in Shahjahanpur and houses in the neighbourhoods of Dalanwalla and Lucknow. Unselfconsciously Hyder upholds syncretic ideals and celebrates hybridity in all the stories – ideals she imbibed while growing up in a culturally liberal environment, ideals that her family valued and which were strengthened in the neighbourhood peopled by well-to-do Indians, Englishmen and Anglo-Indians, in Dehradun during her childhood. Muslims and Hindus co-existed with graceful camaraderie and unselfconscious acceptance of one another. There was carol singing to the accompaniment of the accordion and guitar at Christmas time (“Dalanwalla” 67). In Lucknow, Isabella Thoburn strengthened her syncretic sensibilities. Several stories, predominantly “After the Flight”, “Star-Crossed” and “Mona Lisa” feature mass, pealing church bells, Christmas singing and celebrations. Several feature young Anglo-Indian girls or elderly British or European women and their modes of livelihood during the last years of the Raj – Mrs Lorenzo who teaches music, Mrs Chapman who runs a hotel, Madame Volga who teaches dance and Pittman's typing institute are drawn from British pensioners' families in the neighbourhood (“Dalanwalla” 45-52) and stand testimony to the “twilight of the Raj”. Verdant greenery, luxuriantly forested hillsides, conifers and fragrant flora provide perspective to Hackman's Hotel, the Savoy, Rajpur Road, Odeon Cinema, Saint Joseph's Academy and the skating rink, all much-loved sights and sounds of Dehradun and Mussoorie.

The stories in *Beyond the Stars* are located in personal, everyday experiences and set against the then-current social, political and cultural ambience. Owing to the extent of autobiographical and biographical borrowings several of them can be classified as fictional life stories. Young Hyder's casual acceptance of a shared cultural heritage stems from an upbringing sans communal prejudices. It matured into an urgency with which she upheld syncretic sensibilities and offered self-critiques to run-down zealotry and separatism. As a writer affecting large readerships, she felt committed to promoting ideals of harmonious co-existence. Her engagement with World War I evolved into a life-long commitment to foreground exigencies of politically perpetrated catastrophes on ordinary lives. Her oeuvre gives precedence to art and culture, expressing that through them alone can man, caught in a bevy of cataclysms, find fulfilment. Her new-fangled narrative styles, uncommon in Urdu literature, were meant perhaps, to mask subjective sensibilities or generate a semblance of dissociation. Over the years as the range of Hyder's themes expanded, she gradually gave these up in preference for realistic modes. Located in real-life matters and apprehensions, *Beyond the Stars* provides glimpses into Hyder's adolescence and youth; it is also a preamble to concerns she elucidated in her oeuvre.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hyder's last writing project, her family saga *Kar-e Jahan Daraz Hai* (*The Task in this World is Endless*) running into three volumes, is an autobiography / biography of sorts, latitudinally expansive, elaborate and digressive. She published letters and a two-volume, comprehensively annotated photo album *Kaf-e Gul Farosh* (*Palm of the flower-seller*). In addition a number of interviews add to our understanding of Qurratulain Hyder, her craft and her philosophies.
- <sup>2</sup> I have touched upon some of these issues in my Introduction to *Beyond the Stars*....
- <sup>3</sup> These cousins feature in *Sitaron se Aage*. Achcho was her friend, philosopher and guide (*Zindagi-nama* 17).
- <sup>4</sup> Her elder brother Syed Mustafa Hyder, who she addressed as Bhaijan or Bhai.
- <sup>5</sup> Iqbal's couplets have been transliterated from Urdu.
- <sup>6</sup> "Dalanwalla", an account based on recall, delineating her childhood days in Dehradun includes accounts of their friendship.
- <sup>7</sup> The Hyder family lived in bungalow 21, on Faizabad Road. "The Caravan" includes a reference to the house (156). In *Kaf-e Gul Farosh* Hyder publishes a photograph of the house taken in 1968, and informs that it remained their residence till her father's death in 1943 (102).
- <sup>8</sup> *Kaf-e Gul Farosh* includes photographs of Nazar Hyder playing the instrument (67-68).
- <sup>9</sup> Suraj Baksh Srivastava (*Andaz* 162).
- <sup>10</sup> Hyder's reference to her indicates that she kept up with the goings-on at her college even after passing out.
- <sup>11</sup> Their residence, 3-Ashiana, Dalanwalla stood near Eastern Canal Road. Adjoining the house were Mango and Litchi orchards. A hill nallah hurtled nearby (*Kar-e Jahan* 327). The railway tracks lay close by.

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# Joginder Paul: The Inextricable Collaboration of Life and Writing

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CHANDANA DUTTA

**Abstract:** Joginder Paul (1925–2016) is known primarily as a fiction writer in Urdu while his substantial non-fiction has remained overshadowed. But Paul's creative output is best understood when his fiction is read alongside his non-fiction. It is illuminating to see how he transforms his life's experiences into stories as well as philosophical cogitations, presenting in wonderful ways how real life can translate unobtrusively into narrative life-writing. For instance, while he writes an entire novel on the impact of migration on memory, he also creates a "Self-obituary" where he sees himself as repeatedly birthing and dying with each physical "migration" that he undergoes. This coalescing of ideas of birth and death, politics and geography, migration, and transmigration, the real and imagined, creates an entirely unique body of writing that shifts seamlessly between fiction and life-writing. It is fiction replete with actual inexplicable events of history, geography, politics, and culture reconfigured in the lives of his characters, peopled with the living as well as the dead, with man and animal alike, where demarcations are easily transcended. In Paul we begin to accept how writing is simultaneously, particularly for him, the process of giving birth and embracing death, and of how a legacy can be processed continuously.

**Keywords:** Re-birthing in fiction, mapping memories, time and timelessness, life experiences, reconfiguring identity

## Fiction and Non-Fiction: Illuminating Joginder Paul's World

Joginder Paul (1925–2016) was an iconic figure in the Urdu literary firmament through seventy years of continued creative effort and output. He started out as a college boy keen to become a writer. To this end, he began publishing in the Murray College magazine where he was studying in Sialkot and very soon became a regular contributor to it. The vagaries of time played truant with research related to Paul and one was unable to find the earliest few of his literary publications. Uncannily, as a great relief – and in keeping with the writer's lifelong belief – friendships, many times unexpected ones, and the generosity and compassion of the human nature and spirit, helped to unearth writings by him which were previously considered lost. It is precisely in these attempts and successes to establish connections, where boundaries seemed to abound, that one can reflect better to understand the philosophy and beliefs of Paul's life and works.

Almost all of Paul's fiction, as well as his many essays, along with the several Forewords and Afterwords he wrote for his own collections, can be seen as clear reflections of his own life experiences and the essence he drew from them. It is interesting that when he is read in entirety, his fiction mapped on to his non-fiction, the congruence between various pieces emerges more clearly. This helps to shape an entirely fresh canvas of ideas that the reader can fall back upon to understand this writer more empathetically. Paul's life was marked by events that he could never treat lightly. His very thoughts and cogitations bore the stamp of these, and in his creative writing they assumed different shapes. He gave many different voices to his characters although the essential questions and dilemmas that they engaged with always remained the same. These events began with the Partition,

and after that in a new phase of life with his subsequent move to the distant continent of Africa, the return home to India from there which was as fraught with uncertainty and drama as the move there had been, and the final journey, so to speak, to Delhi where he lived till his last days. These made up his life experiences. And over time Paul translated these experiences into narratives, stories that took off from what he had lived through, but which also took on their own shape and import although, at their core, they held all the issues that their creator grappled with all his life till the very end.

Thus, Paul's creative universe abounds with questions which have their focus on birth and death, exile and migration, displacement, homelessness, nationality, and identity, in essence on the moot ideas of belonging and unbelonging, perception and imperception, and so on. He plays upon these concepts while basing his fiction on an everyday world that exists around us. He creates identifiable worlds with their fissures intact while his characters journey through time – the past, present, and future – and these varied factors meld with each other seamlessly. In fact, a lot of his fiction translates his life into stories, but the lines are redrawn according to the choices his characters make and what fits in best with their circumstances. Paul reconfigures actual events of history, geography, politics and culture in his own mind and then translates and transfers these onto the lives of his characters. His fiction is also peopled alike with the living and the dead, as well as with man and animal, where all the demarcations between disparate entities are easily transcended, in fact differences sometimes do not seem to exist at all. When the reader further maps these stories on to her own life, she takes her reading far beyond the page to inject them afresh with meaning. Paul's stories are so every day, so relatable at one level, that they seem to be our stories, not at all removed from the here and now. Therefore, on reading him, we begin to accept how writing is, for him, the process both of giving birth and embracing death simultaneously. And once the creative writer understands and accepts this, can he leave behind a legacy – like Paul has done – that can be processed over and over again.

For instance, therefore, while he writes an entire novel, perhaps his most direct look at the Partition, *Khwabrau* (1990–1991; translated later as *Sleepwalkers* in 1998), on the impact of migration on memory and the subsequent creation of liminal spaces by the protagonist that force his sensitive mind to fashion a “sane” world to be able to live as “normally” as possible, he writes around the same time a “Khud-wafatiya” (1993; “Self-obituary,” 1998), where he sees himself as repeatedly birthing and dying with each physical “migration” that he undergoes. This coalescing of ideas of birth and death, of politics and geography, of migration and transmigration, creates an entirely unique body, and very large at that, of writing that shifts between fiction and life-writing – or life-narrative – simultaneously.

### Exile and Home: Reconceptualising Borders

Paul considered himself an exiled being. Like millions of others of that time, he and his family had been displaced in the Partition of the sub-continent in 1947. It was a hard blow, this loss of birthland, of a childhood home, as also the inexplicable severance of lifelong connections – geographical, historical, social, cultural, and linguistic among others that could not be labelled or named. This one horrific event became a repeated need in him to make sense of how it had affected human minds. Paul has written very often of this in terms of its baffling and unnecessary nature. Because where earlier those who could walk across to each other's homes for different meals at different times of the day now found themselves mired in political and bureaucratic officialese and paperwork that seemed unending. This made him strive to understand the consequences that went much beyond the obvious, beyond the fallout of a simple crossing over from the familiar to the unfamiliar and a forced acceptance of borders where previously there were none.

This loss manifested itself in Paul's writings in varied ways. The idea of home, which he himself always grappled with, begins to mean different things to his different characters. To an old lady, in his iconic "Dadiyan," an empty house isn't the manifestation of fear and loneliness. Rather she happily peoples it with her infinite memories and the multiple projections of her own self. The house is her only certainty in a world that's been shattered beyond recognition. She sees herself mirrored within its many rooms creating a companionship like no other. On her death, in fact, she is surrounded and mourned by her many alter-selves, comforted in the presence of these "many," self-sufficient in her journey to the otherworld. It is, in fact, her grandson who is startled by these "dadiyans," grandmothers, when he rushes to take care of her last rites, mistakenly fearing that she who lived "alone" will be bereft in her death as well.

It is this quality in Paul's characters that enables them to create fertile grounds in his fiction to inhabit spaces which they would not have access to typically. This human ability to create and ensure "sanity" in situations that can drive people insane otherwise, is what creates the most profound layers in a seemingly ordinary and mundane world that Paul builds in his stories. Interestingly, Paul hardly ever referred to the actual Partition. He did not often speak of it, neither directly nor obliquely, in the long years he created fiction, although he did write sharply about it in his essays. One does not even find a direct mention of it either as a historical happening, or a political necessity. And his characters – although they seem to go through the motions of living out this incident in a loop – do not ever speak of it in any way that can allow the reader to put a name to it. It is to be inferred and presumed, but no fixed meaning can be ascribed to the stories.

Perhaps the writer never saw this grey in-between zone of lucidity and fuzziness as madness. Perhaps it was, and should be seen as, a deep heart-wrenching pain at a loss and an even greater need by the human consciousness and mind to rebuild the shattered ramparts of the self to push on valiantly. It is this that occurs again and again in him, be it in *Khvabrau* through its protagonist Deewane Maulvi Saheb, or through the sage-like Khodu Baba of the eponymous "Khodu Baba ka Maqbara" who slips between periods of focus and delusion, or even the plucky Dadi of "Dadiyan" who surrounds herself with endless projections of herself to keep loneliness and madness at bay.

The Partition was not just the loss of land and home for Paul; it was literally the cleaving of the tongue, and the splintering of a shared past and emotions. In fact, he did not see any visible difference between the people and the goings-on on either side of the border. Therefore, the dog in his story "Bahar se Bheetar" is completely befuddled, at first unable to cross the road that seems dangerous and full of threat to its life. It doesn't help either when he does cross over from one side to the other, because the people on both sides seem as cruel as the other, kicking him about and raining curses down at him so much so that he can no longer recall where he belongs. Paul transfers the idea of the border on to the road. The road becomes a physical presence that takes on an identity of its own and propels a feeling of loss of self on a psychological plane. But Paul continues to impel his reader to read between the lines, to draw their own inference and to expand the horizon of the literary canvas to their own life experiences. Hence, the road that one can read as the border can also be seen as any divide inherent to the human situation.

### Reconfiguring Memory and Space

This state of near amnesia (one can never be sure whether a character is really suffering from amnesia or if it is a protective mechanism that kicks in as and when required) is a recurrent one and it harbours a split self although it does not appear to be so. Duality as an integral part of any state of being is, therefore, intrinsic to Joginder Paul, in life as much as in his creative universe. He himself was a refugee in the physical sense of that word,

ousted and uprooted. The first uprooting happened in 1947 and it lacerated his being. But the subsequent ones came of his own choice, although yes, triggered by circumstances. In 1948, he moved to Nairobi in Kenya. His fourteen-year stay in that distant country was marked by a literary efflorescence that announced his arrival as a young writer with a fresh voice and style on the Urdu scene back home. Paul's personal life was characterized by his own state of mind, almost a self-flagellation at his improving circumstances while many of his family were left behind at home in India trying their best to cope under insurmountable difficulties. Even as he had stepped off the ship on the Kenyan shores, he was looking back at the country that he had left behind, yearning to return. His office desk held a resignation letter that he had penned almost as soon as he joined work as Master at a school in Nairobi. That letter waited over a decade to be submitted, its writer ever ready to take off for home. This was the situation that Paul inhabited, every day, always looking back, over his shoulder, always the insider-outsider.

These complex layers in Paul's nature, his continued need to address every issue in life in a penetrating manner, were then translated into his fiction and can be seen far more sharply in a phase of writing where the form of the short story defies the set parameters of a well-presented beginning, middle and end but rather unspools in a series of questions and answers between characters, and in fact, where sometimes the narrator takes over both the roles of the one who asks and the one who responds, almost setting off a performative tone much like the *dastan*. And it is indeed in this "ask and tell" that the reader is perhaps able to apply her various faculties to grasp the varied import within each story.

It was in Africa that Paul relived a situation very similar to the one he had just left back home. The struggle for independence that he had witnessed in the sub-continent was now playing out in Africa, its locals fighting against the oppression and injustice meted out to them by the British. The writer's belief in social justice and compassion, in fairness and equality, that had already begun to find expression after the mayhem and madness, the brutality and violence that he had seen unfolding around at home, now found a voice in his writing. Paul's Africa stories are full of vignettes that show up people for who they are. In fact, not only do the British masters come under his lens, the powerful and profiteering Asian business class is not spared either. In the multiracial society that he was a part of during his Africa sojourn, Paul brings alive scenes from an everyday world that many readers, even those that have never stepped on to that foreign soil, will empathize with because the experiences are essentially human. Paul, in fact, sharpens his satirical streak to such perfection that his readers are left marveling at the way his stories leave them feeling, at once uncomfortable and amazed. *Land Lust* (2019), the collection of stories from those times published originally as *Dharti ka Kaal* (1961), is not only a testimony to the history and social conditions of that time and place but transcends that past and remains as relevant a testimonial even today, one that allows the multiple voices and subjectivities of the social and creative space to remain energized.

### Transforming Consciousness into Narratives

As a reader one cannot help but marvel at the way Paul felt affected by incidents that he had undergone and how they continued to simmer in his consciousness to manifest as different narratives written over time. One such incident that points the way to read a writer who shaped his own life experiences into philosophies is about his visit in 1959 to a blind home in Machakos in Nairobi. An ordinary visit for all purposes it impacted Paul so strongly that the experience remained with him all through his life and unleashed a creative flood across decades. He wrote short stories, and even *afsanche* or flash fiction, about the concept of blindness, about perception and imperception, about looking and seeing, and ultimately made the scathing comment that one does not need eyes to see and



understand another, or to build connections. These ideas finally resulted also in a novel, *Nadeed* (1983; translated as *Blind* in 2016). The process of creation of this long fictional work itself points to how seriously this writer took his creative role. Having once written the novel Paul felt that it seemed superficial, without any depth. It was as if someone was writing “fiction.” So, he tore the draft to bits and began to behave as if he was indeed “blind.” It took him months to feel his way around his home, his eyes tightly shut, as he groped his way up and down the stairs, trying to experience what it must feel like should someone lose their eyes. Months later he sat down again to write the same novel, this time his pen was steeped in experience and empathy, in a feeling that had been missing earlier.

The creative process of *Nadeed* is an eye-opening lesson for readers and writers. Paul seems to dive so deep into his beliefs of what a writer is meant to do and how he is meant to be, that he takes the concept of life in writing several notches up. He writes of the art of creating fiction in several of his essays, and in many he addresses the reader by giving them the place of co-partner and co-creator of his fiction. He believes that a reader must be ready to immerse herself as deeply as the writer in the unfolding of a narrative to experience every bit of the story and in as great a detail as when it was experienced and subsequently written by its creator. In this the reader must be prepared to exercise as much of her faculties as she can without hoping that the writer will make her creative journey through his narrative easy by putting out the meanings that are contained within it. Paul warns that if the reader is simply looking to be entertained or served then he is not the writer for them. For he believes that his journey as a writer will move forward only when the reader stands shoulder to shoulder with him or indeed walks along in step in complete rhythm not only with him but his characters as well. Taking this further Paul says that he likes to let his characters show him the way to what should become a natural journey and conclusion for any story. The act of writing in Paul, therefore, becomes one of partnership, a fellowship in writing and reading fiction, that stays true to the writer's lifelong beliefs of forging friendships and building relationships. As in the case of all writing – fiction or non-fiction – what the writer leaves behind in print is no doubt the primary vehicle in carrying that legacy forward. But Paul was astute enough to realize and acknowledge further the fact that this legacy could be better disseminated and upheld when each of his readers became a co-traveller with him in all senses of the term. Difficult as this sounds Paul's fiction makes it easy to understand what he perhaps meant. Readers and critics alike will accept that Paul's stories do not fit into a traditionally accepted structure of how a story must be written. His stories do not always have a conventional beginning, middle and end. As influential Urdu critics such as Nizam Siddiqui have put on record, the reader may not find “kahanipan” or “story-ness” in Paul. Therefore, a reader must be completely invested in Paul's fiction to read it insightfully and to be able to unpeel the layers that are hidden within the words. Paul expects his readers to move beyond the words he uses to the actual experience they entail. His attempt is, therefore, to push himself as well as his reader to sift through the obvious surface of the words to pull out the depths that they hide within. This unfolds a process of self-reflexivity, which the author firmly believed in and in which the reader must perforce participate if she wishes to co-habit the world of Joginder Paul. And, in doing so, the narrative takes on different avatars with each different reading and allows for the life experience of its writer to be created and re-created afresh in multiple other narratives, each of which draw strength and meaning from the varied life experiences of its readers.

It is worth relating another instance when Paul used his personal experience to create fiction. During their days in Kenya, the writer's wife was admitted to hospital for an operation. As the operation proceeded, she started losing blood at an alarming rate and the doctors, unable to find a match for her rare blood group, almost gave up hope of her

survival. But an unexpected turn of events helped to save her life and she came home soon enough. This incident took place in 1953 and nine years later, in 1962, Paul published a novel titled *Ek Boond Lahu Ki* (translated as *A Drop of Blood*, 2020). This incident must have been alarming and extremely distressing for the writer and his family and every moment of that period of stress, although brief, must have filled him with questions of why and how. The novel raises numerous questions, all of which are centered around the idea of blood. By bringing to the fore his overarching concerns about identity, about birth and death, the feeling of exile and aloneness, and ultimately the question of choice no matter what the circumstances, Paul's different characters point us to the nature of choice through their own choices and their consequences. The protagonist of the novel, Karan, handsome, charming, and educated finds no openings which allow him to make a living. He then resorts to selling his blood, his blood type being a rare one. His delight and budding sense of achievement at having successfully managed this "transaction" – after all he gives blood in exchange for money – soon pull him into a way of life that forces him to make choices that sap him of his strength – physical, mental, and psychological. His very life becomes a series of transactions, where each transaction slowly impacts him and his relationships. Karan ends up spent, drained of his essence. In this process he is deluded and seduced by the young wife of his elderly neighbour, impregnating her but never able to acknowledge or claim his role in any way. He starts out by taking the role of an assistant and researcher to a well-known doctor in the city but ends up as a frequent blood donor to keep the doctor in good health. His love life is in shambles and the self-laceration that he goes through about whether blood should be donated or sold does not leave him fit to live. It is only at the very end when he finally takes the decision to set up a charitable blood bank that he feels at peace with himself. But as he heads out to begin this work he meets with an accident and dies.

### Death as Rebirth: Cyclical Creativity

Death is an integral aspect in Paul. It is not to be feared but expected and welcomed. In one of his essays, "Mere Jaane Ke Baad" (After I am gone), Paul begins by talking of his apprehensions of how he will be remembered as a writer once he passes on. To ensure that progeny does not forget him Paul draws upon an elaborate scenario where his wife is entrusted with the task of keeping his memory alive. The essay then moves on to another level and the writer takes recourse to an imaginary scenario in the otherworld where he comes across some of the most celebrated names from the literary world of his time. During his conversations with these other writers Paul begins to realize how the greatest creators have built an unforgettable legacy, and how over time it is no longer these writers alone who are responsible for carrying their names forward. This is because every single reader has contributed, through her own interpretation, to these writers' creative universe and has thus become a part of a collective consciousness and cultural memory by claiming that writer as their own. Thus, writers are no longer the sole owners of those works.

So, death, though inevitable, is not something to be afraid of because it can be transcended by creating memories as well as narratives. Rather, death must be embraced because the circle of life and death is in perpetual motion, with death becoming a reality as soon as we take birth. To Paul death was not really the end of life; it could be a presence even in the living. Not being able to "see" was death for him. Not being able to "feel" or allow life to wrench us inside out was death to him. He also brought out the pathos and brutal reality of death for those people who could not "afford" to live life as it was meant to be lived. These were the living dead who walked about like corpses, mired in utter poverty and with no foreseeable future to look forward to. Death, inevitably a part of life, manifests itself with its varied faces and moods through Paul's fiction. In fact, his fiction is replete

with characters who are dead or walk the thin line between the living and the dead. In stories such as “Fakhtayein,” it is not until the last line that the reader finds out that Lobh Singh, the protagonist, who has all along been writing letters to Fazal Deen, his childhood friend from across the border, to relive their memories and in the hope of reconnecting in the future, has actually been communicating with a friend who has been dead many years. In “Khodu Baba ka Maqbara,” the reader comes face to face with what seems like any other insignificant shanty town lifted out of its ordinariness by the sharply drawn life stories of each of its characters. This shanty could belong anywhere, to any town or city. It is unnamed, unremarkable and humdrum. But then maybe not really so. Khodu Baba, friend and guide, indeed confidant to the shanty dwellers, secret keeper to their inner selves, builds his living quarters at the edge of a graveyard, an important feature in a lot of Paul’s fiction. As in *Ek Boond Lahu Ki*, the graveyard is a mirror to the innermost feelings and emotions of the characters. Baba’s audience, which is made not only of the people of the shanty but also their four-legged companions, is also open to those that no longer breathe. But the narrative flows so smoothly across time, over ground and underground, between man and beast, life and death, that only a fully committed reader will be able to pick out the separate threads.

It is in these interchangeable names and identities – like the several Babas strewn across stories and even the *afsanche*, or the character of Khodu Baba himself, a man who supplies no clear information of where he has taken birth or of his connections to family or even an identity that can pin him down in place or time – that Paul’s fiction sends out a message that these are incidentals, immaterial to a life when lived in fellowship and support. Even the dog in “Khodu Baba” takes on the name Khodu, erasing the differences and divides between man and animal, the dead and the living. The message of oneness and compassion, of syncretic existence that was Paul’s lesson from the unforgettable days of violent division is given a cerebral twist, its meanings to be inferred from the depths of the story. It is up to the reader to find these meanings and see these reflected in the world around. Thus, man is not to be seen as man’s enemy, in fact, the enemy does not lie outside the self. Each person must remember that in the annihilated scenario that is present all around, whether because of political or historical reasons, or any other for that matter, the enemy lies within. In his story “Jungle,” Paul makes a scathing comment on the repercussions of the Partition without, again, referring to it directly. He writes, “At the last moment when there was no friend around, he depended on an enemy!... This one moment of friendship has brought back memories of all my previous births. I forget this enemy of mine in every birth but I am confronted with him in each birth. I die when he dies and he is reborn with my life.”

Social identity and human characteristics are not only bestowed on animals, rather Paul’s stories take forward this philosophy to bring into his fictional ambit the environment and ecology that seem to hold within them the DNA of the universe. For example, in a story like “Chahar Darvesh,” the trees seem to contain the knowledge that in times to come it will be the human race that will crave to replace them by wishing to become trees themselves. It is these trees, tall and independent above the ground, individuals in their own right, that are in truth entwined with one another, unseen, under the ground, where their roots go deep inside, creating a network that is inseparable, enmeshed, supportive and holding them all together. They are the real ones to provide a habitat for all of life.

In the novel *Paar Pare* (2004), translated into English as *Beyond Black Waters* (2007), a story of resettled Indians in the far away Andamans, Paul’s diverse concerns about birth and death, identity and nationality, home and homeland, all seem to culminate within this slim world of fiction. History is deeply intertwined with the daily lives of the people of this island. Past and present, history and fiction come together in an almost prophetic comment on the lives of those who people the island and also those that are never mentioned

but ever-present, that is people from the mainland. This locale of a seeming haven of peace is shown slowly to be disintegrating. The Andamans are reshaped in this novel as a land of love and friendships, a far cry from its dark and gory history that is etched in the memory of all Indians, associated as the islands are with the oppressive state of politics and society under the British. In the context of the narrative, it is the former prisoners of the island who show the way forward by re-creating a world full of sharing and friendship that makes it easy to forget that a certain phase of history ever took place, although the threat of divide soon begins to loom large over them. *Paar Pare* is about the individual who is part of a community, about what it means to carry forward the concept of nation and nationality in one's mind across the seas. Just as the enemy is within, does one carry within themselves the meaning of life as well, even when journeying across the seas? Or, is it physical distance that teaches one what life is meant to be? Everything seems to be the two sides of a single coin and it is in one's perception that one assigns to things meaning and value. Interior and exterior, meaning and meaninglessness, friend and enemy, life and death, it is the perceiver who holds the seeds and essence of it all within themselves. The capacity to fully unfold such meanings lies within each of us. It is in the choices that are exercised – by the writer, characters and, ultimately, the readers – that stories take shape and narratives are created. All narratives build histories. Story writing is also creative history building. But because of its very nature the reader is forced to walk the tightrope between her participation in a fictional account and the niggling suspicion that she is being made privy to veiled references about the author's life as well as the social patchwork that both the writer and she inhabit. Hence, the varied dichotomous labels that have come to be used. Some of these set fictions apart from writing that is considered more authentic, such as life writing, or narrative writing, where one sees the author as a documenter striving to leave behind accounts of a life and times that he or she has lived through or witnessed.

### Why Write?

To quote the writer himself on the process of writing and the role of the writer:

Why does one write at all? For success or for suffering? If he strives to be a “success boy,” he should do it directly. Why resort to creative writing? Creative writing necessarily implies a sort of communication which predisposes the writer's involuntary urge to suffer for all his fellow beings. It may sound tragic that the poor writer has to live in and through all his characters by not being himself. He cannot become everybody unless he himself were nobody. So, he's no problem to himself: his problem consists in others, all including villains and vamps. He himself is the killer he chooses to portray. He doesn't *judge* the killer. He becomes him and owns his sins. It's in this sense that creative writing is regarded as confessional. Many a time, the writer choosing to operate “successfully” in his society would rather be one who withdraws, judges and condemns, not the one who is condemned. No, please! Rather than this, let the writer remain misunderstood and disturbed (“On the Making of Fiction.” Joginder Paul in Conversation with Sukrita Paul Kumar. *Blind*, pg. 215-16).

In the short story, “Peeche” (Looking back), that lets out its meaning only a little at a time over several readings, Paul goes back to an Aurangabad-like setting although there is nothing to confirm this city as its location. Aurangabad, the city of Sufis and saints and of graves and ancient trees, was where the writer spent fourteen long years. It was a place he loved deeply, as much as he had loved Sialkot, his birthplace. Its graveyards – there was one just opposite the house where he lived and which he “haunted” frequently, including a grave/dargah just below his own house – offered a companionship that he perhaps missed in real life. This graveyard was also where he found himself at peace and where he thought he felt his mother's presence and could have an uninterrupted conversation with her as do several protagonists of his stories. In “Peeche,” the narrator is right in the middle

of a situation that is at once dreamlike while it is a deeply philosophical and spiritual take on history and archeology – on the fluidity of time which flows from an ancient past to the present in spite like an uninterrupted river, where stone sculptures can melt and come alive at the slightest hint of solitude but where men can turn to stone when they have experienced the deepest connections with the infiniteness of time and the universe, to appear again as imprints on the craggy mountain faces and caves, just as one has seen in the Ajanta Caves.

This unbreakable connection between man, nature and universe is an assurance that the continuance of legacy, particularly of ideas and creativity, is undeniable. It is for the human spirit to will itself to open up to the mysteries of the universe and the world that surrounds it. And should one manage to establish that most essential and deepest of bonds with the world they live in – although they may not “see” it – then one can overcome what is finite, and embrace and rise above death and ordinariness, to not just uplift themselves to a level that dreams are made of but to also have played a small part in contributing to what is beautiful and eternal in the universe, both the real and the creative. And this is the life Joginder Paul lived, and this is world of fiction and narratives that he refashioned and left behind for his readers.

New Delhi, India

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# “Did This Really Happen?”: Amit Chaudhuri’s Acknowledgement of the Autobiographical

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**Abstract:** In a recent online lecture, the acclaimed novelist Amit Chaudhuri responded to an accusation that has greeted his fiction since the start of his literary career: that since, as he openly admits, his novels contain people and events that are drawn from his own life, they are better thought of as thinly disguised memoirs—as not really novels at all. In this paper, I discuss this charge by drawing on an account by the philosopher Stephen Mulhall of the work of another distinguished novelist—J.M. Coetzee (more specifically, that work which features the character Elizabeth Costello). In particular, I want to establish the pertinence to Chaudhuri’s lecture of Mulhall’s analogy between aspects of that work and the work of the influential art historian and critic Michael Fried on the history of modernist painting. In so doing, I aim to show that the commitment to the projects of literary modernism and realism which Mulhall sees in Coetzee (and Costello), can also be seen in Chaudhuri’s understanding of the sense in which his novels both are, and are not, autobiographical.

**Keywords:** Amit Chaudhuri, autobiography, the novel, Stephen Mulhall, J. M. Coetzee, Michael Fried, Manet, modernism, realism

In a recent online lecture, the acclaimed novelist Amit Chaudhuri responded to an accusation that has greeted his fiction since the start of his literary career: that since, as he openly admits, his novels contain people and events that are drawn from his own life, they are better thought of as thinly disguised memoirs—as not really novels at all.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I discuss this charge by drawing on an account by the philosopher Stephen Mulhall of the work of another distinguished novelist—J.M. Coetzee (more specifically, that work which features the character Elizabeth Costello).<sup>2</sup> In particular, I want to establish the pertinence to Chaudhuri’s lecture of Mulhall’s analogy between aspects of that work and the work of the influential art historian and critic Michael Fried on the history of modernist painting. In so doing, I aim to show that the commitment to the projects of literary modernism and realism which Mulhall sees in Coetzee (and Costello), can also be seen in Chaudhuri’s understanding of the sense in which his novels both are, and are not, autobiographical.

## Realism, Modernism, and the Novel

In addition to Fried, Mulhall draws on the work of two other influential critics and theorists of the arts—Terry Eagleton and Ian Watt—in order to articulate his understanding of the projects of realism and modernism in relation to the genre of the novel. And his account takes off from the following preliminary definition of the genre, taken from the opening of Eagleton’s *The English Novel*:

It is less a genre than an anti-genre. It cannibalizes other literary modes and mixes the bits and pieces promiscuously together. You can find poetry and dramatic dialogue in the novel, along with epic, pastoral, satire, history, elegy, tragedy and any number of other literary modes...The novel quotes, parodies and transforms other genres, converting its literary ancestors into mere components of itself in a kind of Oedipal vengeance on them...The novel is an anarchic genre, since its rule is not to have rules. An anarchist is not just someone who breaks rules, but someone who breaks rules as a rule. (Mulhall 141)



Understanding the novel in these essentially parasitic terms immediately suggests that the roots of the genre will reside in a certain kind of critical or Oedipal relation to a preceding literary genre or genres; and Eagleton (like many commentators) proposes the romance as the novel's primary generic ancestor: "novels are romances—but romances which have to negotiate the prosaic world of modern civilization ... [a] place where romantic idealism and disenchanted realism meet" (Mulhall 141). In other words, to the novelist, the defining conventions of romanticism appear as no longer capable of facilitating the representation of reality in a way that accurately captures its true nature—rather, they misrepresent or falsify it—leading her to recognise that, in the name of a continued commitment to the faithful representation of the real, they must be radically subverted or otherwise overturned. In this way, from or at the moment of its birth, the novel's characteristic conjunction of the spirits of anarchy and realism can be understood to generate a distinctively modernist relation to itself. As Mulhall puts it, "Modernism, realism, and the novel are as if made for one another" (142).

He continues however by identifying what appears to be the self-defeating nature of such an account, a problem he finds summarised in the following quote from Watt's canonical study of the origin of the genre in *The Rise of the Novel*: "Formal realism is, of course ... only a convention; and there is no reason why the report on human life which is presented by it should in fact be any truer than those presented through the very different conventions of other literary genres" (Mulhall 144). In effect, Watt is here pointing out the conventionality of the conventions of formal realism, that the novel is of course as much a literary genre as the romance: just like its generic predecessor, it is populated by fictional individuals whose impression of reality depends on the employment of literary resources which are no less conventional, and the text as a whole can only ever achieve a representation of the real rather than reality itself. So, what kind of authority or superior claim to realism can the novel actually be said to possess? And for Watt (amongst others), the force of this question was soon to become apparent in the history of the novel, to inevitably subversive effect. By the 1760s *Tristram Shandy*, for example, would not only embody the resources of formal realism in order to create a convincing impression of reality, but simultaneously (and to the point of parody) make their conventionality a thematic as well as a formal issue. Consequently, Mulhall claims that it is not only the novel's originating relation to other literary genres that can be characterised as parasitic or anarchic; rather it also has a similarly Oedipal relation to previous work within the genre itself, and so to the generic conventions it has been bequeathed. This leads him to suggest that the history of the novel might therefore be understood in terms of novelists' repeated subjection of their inheritance of realistic conventions to critical questioning in order better to create an impression of reality in their readers (largely, by drawing their attention to the conventionality of those conventions). As he puts it:

[The novel] endlessly renews its claim to be an unprecedentedly faithful representation of individual human experience of the world in comparison with other literary genres precisely by claiming to be more faithful to that task even than its novelistic predecessors. Only by ceaselessly testing, criticising, and otherwise innovating with respect to the conventions through which it represents reality can the novelist create the impression that, unlike her predecessors' merely conventional efforts, she is conveying reality to her readers as it really is for the first time. And since her best efforts could only result in the recreation of new conventions, they—and so the impression of reality they make possible—will inevitably be vulnerable to the critical questioning of her own successors. (145–6)

With this brief summary of Mulhall's account of the relation between realism, modernism, and the novel in place, I want now to begin my discussion of its relevance to Chaudhuri's understanding of his own work, and to the accusation to which that work is often subjected.

### Family Resemblances I: Chaudhuri, Coetzee, Costello

As Chaudhuri's opening discussion of the resemblance between his maternal uncle and F.N. Souza's charcoal self-portrait illustrates, insofar as their subjects can be seen to share certain common features, a portrait of one person may also be taken as the portrait of another (we might wonder whether Souza's self-portrait also resembles in some way Chaudhuri himself, insofar as the author may have inherited, on his mother's side, certain familial features shared by his uncle). Similarly, I want to suggest that Mulhall's portrait of Coetzee (and importantly, Costello) as a modernist realist is one that can also be taken to apply to Chaudhuri's self-portrait—to his understanding, such as it is, of himself as a writer of novels—presented in his lecture.

For example, in portraying Coetzee in such terms we might say that Mulhall takes him to be manifesting an inherently problematic desire: that the author is simultaneously both repelled and attracted by his inheritance of the novel's generic conventions as the means by which he might create a convincing appearance of reality; what we might think of as a fundamentally unsettling experience that forces him to subject that inheritance to critical questioning (for example by formal innovation), and thereby to occupy, seemingly despite his literary success, an essentially unsettled or unorthodox (say, anarchic) position in relation to the genre as a whole. And it would seem that Chaudhuri understands himself in similar terms, and with similar consequences. For he admits to being critical of and variously dissatisfied with the novel as a genre—confessing that he cannot help but to find its formal conventions or rules boring, or worse, abhorrent (hardly surprising then that he should want to devote a lecture to exploring the question of why it is that he writes novels at all)—and so thinks of his work, again seemingly despite its success, as outside or counter to the culture of the literary mainstream (a spirit of anarchism that gains further expression in Chaudhuri's development of and commitment to what he calls "literary activism"). Nevertheless, at the same time Chaudhuri confesses that he cannot help but find himself repeatedly drawn to the form. Indeed, despite deliberately trying to make a break from the novel—and succeeding for nearly a decade—he was eventually unable to resist his (insofar as he views himself as neither a "natural" writer nor reader of novels [Chaudhuri 4.5]) unnatural attraction to the practice of writing fiction and went back to it again; and then again, and again. We might think of this apparently inescapable desire or compulsion as disclosing the feminine side or aspect of the novel's modernist story of Oedipal revenge; that the novelist is somehow unwilling or unable entirely to deny the significance of the inherited conventions which gave birth to his originating attraction to the genre, and so to the genre itself—that he is so to speak, haunted by the figure of a mother.

But even before or behind such comparative exercises, Coetzee and Chaudhuri can be seen to share two obvious common features that can be quickly sketched: both novelists have been subject to critics' continuing attempts to locate them in relation to specific cultural, national, and literary contexts (as respectively, white and Asian, South African and Indian; and as variously modernist or postmodernist, colonial or postcolonial); and both have written novels which self-consciously appropriate canonical literary sources (*Robinson Crusoe* in Coetzee's *Foe*, the *Odyssey* [and to a degree, *Ulysses*] in Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad*, in which he relocates the epic to the reality of the streets of London in 1985). And this sense of a marked similarity between the two authors is intensified when one notes that they also have a shared propensity variously to attribute these same features to the protagonists of their fictions (an apparent common emphasis on the identification of author with character which eventually leads them to write texts whose narrators are called respectively, 'John Coetzee' [in the trilogy *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*], and 'Amit Chaudhuri' [in *Friend of My Youth*]). For example, Coetzee's recurring protagonist Elisabeth Costello is like him a celebrated novelist (for Mulhall, one who shares her author's

modernist realist aspirations), whose Australian origins put her at risk of being treated (as her son warns) of being treated as “a Mickey Mouse post-colonial writer”; and she too found success in the appropriation of a canonical literary text (relocating Joyce’s Molly Bloom from the confines of her bedroom to the reality of the streets of Dublin in 1904, in her *The House on Eccles Street*). And Chaudhuri’s namesake in *Friend of My Youth* is also an acclaimed novelist, who like his creator was born in Calcutta, grew up in Bombay, and whose fifth novel (by coincidence) was also called *The Immortals*—and expresses a similar resistance to the expectations of an Indian novel in English.

As Chaudhuri explains, the accusation that since he writes from life his novels are, obviously, not really novels but memoirs, is a long-standing one. Even before the issue returned with a new acuteness with the appearance of Amit Chaudhuri in *Friend of my Youth* (Chaudhuri’s seventh novel) his work had repeatedly courted or invited this charge. His first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, for example, describes two childhood visits made from Bombay by a boy, Sandeep, and his mother to his (maternal?) uncle’s house in Calcutta; visits which Chaudhuri admits to having himself made, and at roughly the same time (leading the publisher and critic Karl Miller, after reading a chapter, to exclaim “It’s your bloody memoir!” [Chaudhuri 1.3]). And *Odysseus Abroad* (Chaudhuri’s sixth novel)—based on memories of his days as an undergraduate in London in the early 1980s—casts his maternal uncle as Odysseus and himself as Telemachus, an initial conceit which leads the author to map a proliferating series of features from his life onto the epic (Chaudhuri 1.7). This approach can of course be understood to reach its vertiginous peak or climax in *Friend of My Youth*, in which its first-person narrator, Amit Chaudhuri, details a series of events during a visit to Bombay in 2011 for the purposes of a book tour (staying at a club in Malabar Hill overlooking the building in which he grew up; visiting the Taj Mahal hotel to exchange some shoes; being interviewed by a newspaper; eating Parsi/Iranian food at Britannia restaurant; giving a reading from *The Immortals*; and missing an absent friend who has gone into rehab) all of which had occurred in Chaudhuri’s own life; and which ends with Amit Chaudhuri returning to Bombay, partly to engage in research for writing what he knows will become *Friend of My Youth*.

Given this apparent repeated identity of author and character, it is then hardly surprising that the questions “Is it from your life? Did this really happen?” should arise with tiresome regularity whenever Chaudhuri is asked about his work. As he says about one such incident, on the occasion of the publication of *Friend of My Youth*:

When the book came out, an interlocutor asked me, in the course of one of those events that newly published books can’t do without, if everything I’d described in it had happened. “More or less, I suppose. Almost all of it,” I said. “Then why call it a novel?” he asked, smiling pityingly, as if at a man who has a chronic problem he’s not aware of. “Why not say it’s a memoir?” (2.2)

But despite this blithe admission of the autobiographical nature of his novels, Chaudhuri nevertheless still wants to maintain that his fiction is exactly that: that for all that he might write from life, he still wants to claim that his novels in fact detail episodes that had no existence prior to their writing—they are “inventions,” he “made them up” (2.4, 7.1). As he says of *Odysseus Abroad*, “Everything in it is from life, and nothing in it is” (2.4).

How then are we to make sense of these apparently contradictory or paradoxical claims? Chaudhuri explains that his immediate response to his interlocutor’s question was to argue that the structure of the book was too fragmentary, and the excursions of Amit Chaudhuri which formed the book’s subject too sporadic, to count as a memoir; that since a memoir “must recount part or all of what happened to oneself... No respectable memoir should take a such a form” (2.2). In a Wattian spirit, however, we might say that these remarks seem hasty; we might question their prescriptive tone and invocation of the notion of

respectability. For if the genre of the novel is subject (albeit to an intensified or defining degree) to the rule- or convention-breaking operation of modernism, then why not other literary genres and forms, such as autobiography? However that may be, a year or two later Chaudhuri himself comes to reflect on the accuracy of his response and qualifies it by saying that when he admitted that everything he'd described in *Friend of My Youth* had happened (more or less), this was "true in one sense and untrue in another" (2.3); by which he meant that although the events which the novel details had really occurred, they had done so at different times, independent of each other. Thus, the episode of his visit to Bombay in March 2011 which occupies the first two thirds of the book actually never took place. So, when in the novel Chaudhuri writes the following paragraph, he takes himself as not only staying true to his sense of what is significant, but as giving shape to what's never existed:

In front of the building, upon the road—there's no pavement here—sits a woman on her haunches, displaying a basket of fruit. What she offers that the grocers' opposite don't, I can't say. In another area, there'd be a gaggle of squatting women. Here, she is one. One is enough for Little Gibbs Road. (Chaudhuri 2.4)

As he puts it:

Although I have crossed Little Gibbs Road many times, I never crossed it in March 2011 in the early evening, mainly because I wasn't in Bombay in March 2011. I never saw that woman sitting on her haunches selling fruit, though I may have seen such a woman at some time. (2.4)

Similarly, with respect to *Odysseus Abroad* and *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the day of 19 July 1985 whose arc the former follows is non-existent (Chaudhuri admits that, personally speaking, he was in Bombay at the time, so there was no chance of his encountering the figures of Menelaus on Warren Street or Odysseus in Belsize Park), and the incident in the latter, where Sandeep is present when his uncle has a heart attack, never occurred (Chaudhuri heard about it on the phone).

For Chaudhuri then, these various factual divergences or differences (of time, order, detail) between what really took place and what his novels describe—between episodes that had actually happened and those he had invented—constitute the sense in which his admission that everything described in them had occurred is both true in one sense and untrue in another; that everything in them is from life, and yet nothing is. I want now to argue that one way of understanding Chaudhuri's position here is to see it an expression of his modernist realism, of his novels as embodying a critical relation to the established literary conventions which he has inherited to create the impression of reality. And in so doing, I want to refer to the figure of Costello, rather than to Coetzee (thereby affirming the latter's success in creating the impression of the former as a modernist realist author—his success in creating the impression of Costello as a real individual in a way that bears comparison to that of a real human being [like a self-portrait might resemble its artist] insofar as her position here resembles that of Chaudhuri). For as it happens, Mulhall quotes an incident from *Elisabeth Costello* that is surprisingly similar to the one involving Chaudhuri and his interlocutor. When during an interview, the eponymous author is asked whether her most recent novel is autobiographical, she explains: "Of course we draw upon our own lives all the time—they are our main resource, in a sense our only resource. But no, *Fire and Ice* isn't autobiography. It is a work of fiction. I made it up" (Mulhall 167). While the unavailability to us of *Fire and Ice* prevents any appreciation of the extent to which its specific mixture of life and literature compares to that of *Friend of My Youth*, the parallel here between the two authors' responses is striking.

Mulhall immediately follows this quotation with a brief but suggestive remark that relies on his earlier analogy between the history of literary modernism and that of pictorial modernism (as the latter is interpreted by Fried, with particular reference to the work of Manet<sup>3</sup>):

This is the analogue in Costello to Manet's acknowledgment of his paintings as both conditioned by, and yet not reducible to, the fact of their being painted, and painted by one particular, historically situated individual. In both cases, to deny any relation between creator and creation would be as foolish as to [in Chaudhuri's case, passionately or pityingly] identify the two. The reality is, one might say, that they are embedded in one another. (167)

What then is the nature of this analogy, and how might it relate to the vexed issue of the nature of Chaudhuri's novels?

### Family Resemblances II: Chaudhuri and Manet

On Mulhall's account, Fried's Manet, like his novelistic counterparts, is engaged in the critical questioning of the realist conventions by and through which the history of his artistic endeavour has been determined—the most central or primordial of which, in his case, is that paintings are made to be viewed or beheld, and therefore presuppose the existence of a viewer or beholder capable of doing so. According to Fried however, the contemporary condition which gives rise to such questioning, and to which Manet's work is a response, is one in which that convention has become deeply problematic for the enterprise of painting as such. For he takes it (drawing on the critical writings of Diderot) that by roughly the same period as that in which a loss of conviction in its prevailing conventions to represent reality was being felt by writers and readers in the genre of the novel, serious painters had started to sense that the existence or presence of a beholder could no longer be taken for granted—that the representations of reality found in painting were no longer capable of gripping or absorbing their increasingly estranged and alienated viewers, a development that threatened a loss of conviction in the very idea of pictorial representation itself, in the sheer possibility of creating convincing depictions of reality by means of pigment on canvas (irrespective of the specific painterly conventions artists might employ); and thereby endangered the status of painting as a major art.

Fried goes to explain that if such a threat was to be averted, the artist therefore had to create paintings that somehow earned, accomplished, or affirmed the beholder's presence or existence. As such, the essential task of the painter becomes above all to attract, arrest and finally to enthrall a beholder; to create a painting that brings the viewer to a stop in front of itself and holds her there in a state of perfect absorptive involvement, as if spellbound. If, however, the painting betrayed any consciousness of that task, it would thereby court theatricality by making the beholder aware of herself, and so of the illusion of reality by means of which she had been halted in front of the painting, thus breaking its spell. In the face of this theatricalising force, Fried outlines two antitheatrical artistic responses or strategies intended to recover the beholder's absorptive attention. The first (advocated by Diderot) embodied the seemingly paradoxical idea that only by establishing the fiction of the beholder's absence or nonexistence within the body of the painting could her actual placement before it, and enthrallment by it, be secured. But crucially, for Fried, this conception of the pictorial enterprise, and the antitheatrical strategy of which it was a part, ultimately rested upon the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist, the ontological illusion that she was not really there, standing before the canvas. But since of course, any as it were fictional representation of reality can only operate in the context of such a literal or physical scene of representation—of a canvas and a beholder facing one another in space and time—the beholder's existence before the canvas could no more be negated or denied than could the canvas's existence before the beholder. Consequently, this antitheatrical tradition in effect committed itself to the entirely incoherent aim of denying the physical reality of its own works as well as that of those who behold them. And since paintings exist not just as physical objects and as fictional scenes of representation, but as products—the results of meaningful human activity—Fried sees another aspect or



implication of this incoherent denial of the literal scene of representation to be its negation or repression of this further fact about their nature: that in encountering a painting the beholder is not only perceiving an object and (if that encounter is successful) absorbed in a dramatic illusion, but is also confronting the work of another human being.

The second antitheatrical strategy identified by Fried, which he takes as finding its paradigmatic expression in Manet, is diametrically opposed to the first. For he sees Manet as attempting to reconstruct the specific painterly conventions he has been bequeathed in such a way as to acknowledge, rather than to deny, the apparently ineliminable conditions of pictorial representation as such. Manet's work thus realises three essential interrelated conditions or dimensions of any given painting: its material reality as a physical object (as pigment on canvas); its capacity to generate fictional pictorial space (thus relating it to a beholder); and its createdness (as a canvas that has been deliberately painted, thus relating it to a maker or producer). And according to Fried, Manet's acknowledgment of the createdness of his work is to be found in his unprecedented emphasis on the reality of the models that served him in his painting, and so of the scene of the studio in which they were painted (the as it were primordial or ontologically prior scene of representation to which his work's subsequent literal and fictional representative descendants are necessarily indebted); an emphasis that effectively prolongs the act of painting within—and so makes it continuous with—the painting itself. By forcibly directing his viewers' attention to this relationship between painter, painting, and model, Fried understands Manet as thereby attempting to produce work which acknowledges itself as the site of his own artistic efforts—as having its origins in the actions of a particular human being—and so makes it possible for a beholder to acknowledge her role as the beholder of intentional worked object, of the work that goes into producing a work of art.

In the present context, however, it is this third constitutive condition of painting that is of particular relevance. For we can now understand Mulhall's analogy between Costello and Manet to centre on their shared acknowledgement of the createdness of their respective works of art—their natures as products of their respective creator's artistic efforts. Costello's identification of her life as the main or only resource upon which her writing draws thereby acknowledges that writing as essentially related to or conditioned by that life, as having been written by a particular, culturally and historically locatable, human being. But at the same time, since that createdness is only one of three determining dimensions of anything recognisable as a literary (or pictorial) work of art, it cannot properly be understood as exhaustive of it, as if the latter were simply reducible to or straightforwardly identifiable with it. Rather if such work is to be properly acknowledged, by both novelist and reader, it must in addition be acknowledged as both a physical object (since one cannot acknowledge the process of creating a product without thereby acknowledging the product of that process), and as having the capacity to create fictional representations of reality. For Mulhall then (drawing on a phrase of Costello's), it seems more accurate to characterise the relation between *Fire and Ice* and its author—between creation and creator—as one of “embedding”, rather than identity (or indeed difference): that although the literary or artistic achievement of Costello's fiction is rooted or embedded in an originating matrix of literal—cultural, historical, and not to forget psychic and familial—contexts and factors that undeniably significantly condition or determine it; they do not thereby exhaust or define it. As Costello affirms, *Fire and Ice* isn't an autobiography, it is a work of fiction.

Extending this analogy to Chaudhuri, we might then understand *Friend of My Youth*'s unprecedented emphasis on its author, on the reality of the person who served in its writing—an emphasis that in effect makes the work of writing continuous with the work itself (most explicitly in the novel's concluding reference to its own composition)—as a similar acknowledgment of its createdness. Indeed, we might say that Chaudhuri's persistent and forceful direction of his readers' attention, throughout his literary career, to the



ineluctable relationship between novelist and novel (embedding himself within them by drawing upon or writing from his life) thereby allows him to produce novels which both acknowledge him—the specific human being that he is—as their creator, and themselves as the products of that particular human being's creative efforts (thus embedding them within him). But again like Costello, insofar as Chaudhuri takes the createdness of his novels as not definitive of them (that everything in them is from life and nothing is, that the events they contain both had happened and had not) he claims that his novels are not memoirs but fictions in which, as he puts it, "I make up stories about my life" (7.1). And in so doing, Chaudhuri thereby identifies his novels as embodying a critical relation to the literary conventions which he has inherited—to the genre's prevailing understanding of the distinctions between the realms of facts and of fiction, and of truth and untruth—and so, to the nature of the novel itself and its relation to other literary genres (most immediately, autobiography).

Against this background, the patronising question about the essentially autobiographical nature of *Friend of My Youth* posed by Chaudhuri's interlocutor can be diagnosed as symptomatic of a chronic, recognisably Diderotian, denial of the mutually determining nature of these conditions. But whereas in the case of painting, that antitheatrical tradition denied those conditions by emphasising the fictional scene of representation and thereby occluded or repressed its literal counterpart, Chaudhuri's interlocutor would appear to be doing the reverse: focussing exclusively on the literal createdness of the novel, and so on the person of its creator, to the extent that its capacity to generate fictional representations is entirely negated. As Mulhall puts it, it is as if in the Diderotian mode of antitheatricity, the fictional and the literal are essentially self-cancelling, either the former blocks a proper attentiveness to the latter, or *vice versa*; thereby making it impossible to keep the two in focus simultaneously (155).

More generally, we can see this reductive impulse to identify Chaudhuri the character with Chaudhuri the author—to straightforwardly relate fictional creations to the biography of their creator—as yet another of the continuing attempts by the author's critics (and indeed his admirers) to locate his work in relation to certain specific cultural and historical contexts. But doing so to the extent that, self-defeatingly, their grip on the purported object of their attention—the literary achievement that presumably initiated their original attraction—slips away. And insofar as his readers give in to such an impulse, the familiar sense of independent existence or autonomy which Chaudhuri (typically of writers of fiction) takes his characters to possess is essentially denied. Rather, it seems that such readers are not fully prepared to allow that Chaudhuri's literary progeny can ever break with or outgrow the life of their, so to speak, suffocating parent; thus making them effectively stillborn (or at best disabblingly dependent), not so much embedded in their originating matrix or womb as buried.

This importance of the role of critic is something to which a lifelong friend and interlocutor of Fried, the philosopher Stanley Cavell, gives particular attention, in his understanding of modernism as a condition in which the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and its history has become inherently problematic.<sup>4</sup> For he takes it to be a consequence of that condition that the challenges faced by the creator of a modernist work are ones that are mirrored or shared by its critical audience, since neither are able to rely upon or take for granted the governing conventions they have been bequeathed by the past of their particular practice in order to determine how, and indeed if, the work they create or behold is a genuine example of its living present. For the modernist artist then, nothing outside the work can establish its value or significance; and similarly for her critics, nothing outside of their experience of encountering the work can show that it has established (or failed to establish) the same. Instead, both must look to the work itself to validate, entirely from its own resources, whatever claims might be made with regard to its successfully

exemplifying the present continuation of the relevant artistic tradition, or its failing to do so. In other words, the immediate task of the modernist work of art is to stake a self-reliant or autonomous claim, both for its own existence and for that of the tradition which it aims to inherit; to as it were give account of itself (call it an autobiography) that will attempt to elicit or invite from its audience the conviction that it has earned the right to be acknowledged as a work of art, as deserving of that title as established examples from the history of that endeavour, and thereby allow that tradition to have a future.<sup>5</sup>

The particular burden of the modernist critic is thus to ensure that she gives genuine consideration to the invitation or opportunity that the work embodies. She must make certain that her impression or evaluation of the work is the result of giving her absolute and sincere critical attention to her personal experience of encountering the work as it is in itself; rather than the result of an impersonal and mechanical, essentially prejudicial, application of ingrained professional conventions, labels and expectations. The former will express her openness to the future, to the possibility of establishing new conventions that can create a new creative community (of at least two) which will allow her tradition to progress or continue; while the latter is an essentially inward- and backward-looking impulse—a disabling or paralysing fixation with the deliverances of the past—that occludes her ability seriously to consider the invitation that the artist's work presents; a self-destructive refusal of the possibility of entering into a genuine conversation about the nature of that tradition that will, over time, lead it to go dead.

Against this perilous background, it might not then seem unreasonable to ask those inclined to give a negative evaluation of a modernist work at least to reconsider the true nature of their position—to ask themselves (indeed for them to see themselves as obliged to ask themselves) whether the work has failed them, or they it (of course either could be true). Consequently, those for whom Chaudhuri's novels appear as a series of ever more obvious memoirs should at least give due consideration to the possibility that their view is grounded in various unquestioned assumptions and convictions that repressively dictate that a novel (and indeed, an autobiography) must necessarily possess certain features and take a certain form, rather than being grounded in a genuinely open encounter with it. Ironically, we might diagnose such a view as symptomatic of the failure of the creative or imaginative powers of such critics to appreciate the nature and possibilities of the novel as a genre at precisely the point at which they attribute exactly the same failure (manifest in his reliance on real people and events) to Chaudhuri as a novelist: in effect, making their criticism a self-criticism.

Accordingly, the supercilious refusal of Chaudhuri's interlocutor to acknowledge the fictional character of *Friend of My Youth*—to see there only autobiography—is not only indicative of a literal-minded failure on his part to exercise those powers in relation to that work, but to the genre as a whole. And of course, insofar as the construction of any novel's fictional impression of reality depends on the work of its readers as much as its author, those same imaginative powers are required by the interlocutor if he is to have any possibility of appreciating (positively or otherwise) other examples of the genre. His smirk thus betokens or betrays a reader at increasing risk of denying, or being stripped of, his capacity to imagine, and so of the very possibility of being a reader of fiction at all. A pitiful condition indeed.

But, importantly, this is not to suggest that any and all modernist writing can or should take an autobiographical form—that the only way a modernist author can properly acknowledge the createdness of her work is by writing autobiography (this would in effect be to repeat or succumb to the same failure of imagination as Chaudhuri's Diderotian interlocutor)—but it is to suggest that writing which does can be seen as responding to a recognisably modernist concern, and so cannot be immediately dismissed as an example of the relevant genre (as simply or self-indulgently autobiographical) for doing so. For of

course, if an author finds herself no longer able to draw upon the impersonal conventions that she has inherited to determine the nature and value of her work, she will then naturally have nothing else to draw upon but personal conventions (as Costello might put it, she must become her own main resource, in a sense her only resource); inevitably foregrounding herself in inherently personal artistic statements aimed at establishing new conventions, and so a new artistic community with each of her individual readers. And since the particular genre to which Chaudhuri finds himself repeatedly drawn is one which, from its birth, has displayed a parasitic or cannibalistic relation both to other literary genres and to itself, the fact that he writes novels that manifest a closeness to another genre—that which takes the expression of such personal statements as its defining business—should really be the very reverse of surprising to his audience. Indeed, one might well wonder why they would expect anything less from a gifted contemporary novelist genuinely deserving of that title.<sup>6</sup>

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "Why I Write Novels". The text of the lecture was subsequently published online in *n+1*. In the absence of page numbers and section titles, all references to the text will be given by specifying the numbers of the relevant section and paragraph (e.g., material from the fourth paragraph of the third section would be cited as Chaudhuri 3.4).
- <sup>2</sup> Specifically, chs. 9 and 10 of his *The Wounded Animal*.
- <sup>3</sup> Mulhall draws here on Fried's magisterial trilogy *Absorption and Theatricality; Courbet's Realism; and Manet's Modernism*.
- <sup>4</sup> Most explicitly, in his early collection of essays *Must We Mean What We Say?*
- <sup>5</sup> One might then say that the genuinely autobiographical character of Chaudhuri's novels is to be found not in the fact that he writes from life, but rather in the fact that they constitute works that he has taken a stand on, or stands behind—ones to which he is willing to put his name. In this sense, the autobiographical point is not that the novels contain his story, but that they are *his*.
- <sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Stephen Mulhall and Amit Chaudhuri for comments on a draft of this paper.

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# A Portrait of the Artist as a Social Reformer: Nirala's *A Life Misspent* and "Chaturi, the Shoemaker"

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RUCHI SHARMA

**Abstract:** The Hindi public sphere of early twentieth century India was riven by competing discourses of social reform and cultural nationalism. Nationalist leaders of the time invoked the figure of the 'unmarked' citizen as the foundational unit of the emergent nation-state. In contradistinction to the homogenising impulse of the nationalist discourse, the alterity of the minority subject(s) forms an important theme of the oeuvre of Suryakant Tripathi Nirala. In his lifewritings, *A Life Misspent* and "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", Nirala offers a searing critique of the deeply entrenched hierarchies of a caste-bound patriarchal social order. This essay undertakes a close reading of Nirala's prose life-writings to examine the complex relation between his progressivist politics and his romantic poetics.

**Keywords:** Agency, caste, gender, genre, *Chaayavad*

## Literary Nationalism in the Hindi Public Sphere

The Hindi public sphere of early twentieth century India was riven by the competing imperatives of social reform and cultural nationalism. A central determiner of the debates around these two themes was the mode of historicising employed to validate the respective claims of opposing factions of this discursive formation. Francesca Orsini in her book *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-1940*, discusses the influence of orientalist scholarship on the discursive construction of the past of the emergent nation-state ("The Uses of History" 4). A significant feature of this construction was its location of the origins of the nascent nation-state in a glorious Aryan past. Therapeutic in impulse, nationalist historical narratives then typically proceeded to undertake analyses of the reasons behind the putative decline of the Hindu *rashtra*<sup>1</sup>. As an imagined community, the nation consecrated within the Hindi public sphere of the time was constituted through the marginalisation of its minority subjects. An instance of this homogenising impulse is evident in the structural elision of the issue of caste from the mainstream nationalist discourse. Pointing to the restricted semantic range of words used to denote caste in the Hindi public sphere of early twentieth century, Orsini observes that "caste as *varna* [became] part of 'public' discourse in Hindi, [while] castes as *jatis* were not" ("Introduction" 11).

The issues of gender, caste and class received due critical attention only within the discourse of social reform and the diverse reform initiatives that accompanied it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is in this context that the writers of this "golden period" of Hindi letters deliberated upon the role of literature in the constitution of nationalist consciousness. During his famous address to the first meeting of the Progressive Writers Association in 1936, Munshi Premchand argued that "once literature becomes detached from the patronage of the wealthy, it has the freedom to be truly revolutionary and challenge the dominant paradigms of the time" (qtd in Gajarawala 36). In their self-presentation as the architects of the fledgling state, significant writers of the Hindi literary landscape in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, such as Mahavir Prasad

Dvivedi, invoked the figure of the 'unmarked' citizen as the foundational unit of the emergent state. The rights, interests, aspirations and duties prescribed for the 'unmarked' citizen—unencumbered by caste and gender norms of a traditional society—were then elaborated within a nationalist upper-caste patriarchal literary culture. The seamless nationalist imaginary offered by this group of writers, however, found its counterpoint in the writings of minority (Dalit and women) subjects.

The schematic and rather selective view of the Hindi public sphere of the early twentieth century presented above is complicated by the work of Suryakant Tripathi Nirala. As a radical writer of the *Chaayavad* tradition, Nirala offers a searing critique of the deeply entrenched hierarchies of a caste-bound patriarchal social order and yet retains the universalist aspirations characteristic of the romantic sensibility. It is in the context of the social and political ferment of the early decades of the twentieth century that a distinctly new aesthetic characterised by introspection and a romantic poetics—*Chaayavad*—emerges in the Hindi literary sphere (Rubin 112)<sup>2</sup>. While the central preoccupations of the *Chaayavadins* were metaphysical in character, Nirala's literary corpus exhibits a singular catholicity of interests. Even as Rubin enumerates the common themes to be found in the poetry of the *Chaayavadins*, such as "nature", "love", and "the yearning of the soul for the Infinite", he locates Nirala's distinction from the rest of the group in the latter's direct engagement with a host of contemporary social and political issues (112). Given Nirala's professed political radicalism, this essay studies his prose life-writings, *A Life Misspent* and "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", to examine the discursive construction of the savarna author as a progressive artist and reformer.

### Generic Liminality

A feature common to *A Life Misspent* and "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" is that generically both the texts occupy a liminal space between memoir/autobiography and biography. The eponymous biographical subjects of both the texts—Kulli Bhat and Chaturi—compete for narrative centrality with the author himself. Assuming a stridently progressive voice in the "Preface" of *A Life Misspent* and the opening passages of "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", Nirala presents himself as the radical artist who has chosen to narrate minority subjects—a homosexual man of ambiguous caste origins, and a shoemaker, respectively. What makes these texts particularly engaging is that Nirala employs a self-reflexive, comic tone to critique his own flailing attempts to institute a position of authority vis à vis the eponymous protagonists of the two texts. The narrative telos of both these auto/biographical accounts is directed towards the presentation of the author as a social reformer.

Scott Schlossberg comments on the creative excess of Nirala's style in "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" in that the text eludes neat formal classifications and exhibits features of a memoir, a biographical sketch and even a folk-tale ("Introduction" 464). Nirala opens his account of Chaturi's life by informing the reader that he has undertaken the biographical sketch in response to Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi's exhortation to Hindi litterateurs to write biographies of ordinary people ("Chaturi, the Shoemaker" 465). The literary rendering of vignettes from Chaturi's life is intermixed with Nirala's ironic commentary on contemporary Hindi literary-critical establishment. The autobiographical account that Nirala gives of his growing literary reputation within and outside of his native village forms an important context for his narration of himself as a progressive artist. The social prestige that accrues to the author on account of his literary 'genius' facilitates Nirala's contestations of caste and gender hierarchies within his village.

The narratorial tone in both the texts is richly ironic and often undermines the author himself (or the wider community of writers) as much as the more obvious targets of his satire. In the opening passage of "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", for example, even as the

narrator commends the durability of the shoes Chaturi crafted and the soundness of the latter's literary taste, he satirises the inertia-laden output of contemporary writers and their reluctance to undertake stylistic innovation ("Chaturi, the Shoemaker" 465-466). "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" then narrates two subjects: Nirala and Chaturi. The presentation of the former as a progressive and increasingly famous writer is inextricably tied up with the presentation of the latter as the dispossessed subject who is radicalised, to an extent, through his association with the savarna author.

It is in *Kulli Bhat* that Nirala realises, more completely, his aspiration to render a comprehensive biography of an 'uncommon' ordinary person. Nirala rationalises his choice of Kulli as the subject of his biographical venture by referring to the rare commensurability of the Kulli's actions with his professed ideals. In this, Nirala avers, Kulli is entirely unlike the conventional heroes consecrated by the hegemonic upper-caste culture who "[C]ompensate for their weaknesses with grand statements. The blaze of light around what they say hides how they live" (*A Life Misspent* 1). In addition to its biographical intent, the narrative, Nirala informs the reader in the "Preface", also includes an account of his own life, "more openly perhaps than the orthodox would like". Unapologetic for the unorthodox political positions he assumes in the text, Nirala asks the reader to evaluate the story on the "quality" of its telling.

### *A Life Misspent*

*A Life Misspent* is a deeply engaging narrative to study the discursive formation of the author's savarna subjectivity with reference to his other in terms of caste and sexual orientation. A homosexual man with an ambiguous caste identity, Kulli is a doubly marginalised subject. A significant strand of the narrative has the radical author/narrator trace his own growth as an independent minded person. Intransigent to the excesses of power early in his childhood, Nirala reminisces: "[I] was a lover of freedom. I couldn't bear restrictions when they lacked all reason" (*A Life Misspent* 20). Nirala furnishes examples of his defiance of figures of authority at multiple places in the text, most notably in his account of his relationship with his father, his encounter with the itinerant sadhu and his vexed relationship with his mother-in-law.

The most significant instance of the narrator's independence of spirit in the text is his sustained resistance to his mother-in-law's advice on his interaction with Kulli. Nirala comically recounts his strained relations with his mother-in-law due to his stubborn assertion of his right to form an independent opinion of Kulli. Nirala's autobiographical account of the beginning of his friendship with Kulli is a brilliant exposition of the specular identity formation that characterises hegemonic masculinity. The narrator's need for constant flattery is met by Kulli's covert (homosexual) courtship of him (27, 30-33). Subjecting himself to gentle irony, Nirala recounts his flailing attempts to assert himself in his affinal home. Nirala's narrative suggests that a masculine identity structured by patriarchal privilege and power remains dependent on a constantly-admiring audience in order to validate itself. The account of the early years of Nirala's marriage acquires a particularly radical edge in that the narrator admits to feelings of inadequacy in the company of his highly accomplished wife. Not only is his wife better-read than him in the *khari boli* literary tradition, she is also an accomplished singer (45). Admitting eventually to his romantic attachment to his wife and the consequent emotional vulnerability to her, the narrator resolves to continue his higher-education to gain ascendancy in the relationship.

Even as the narrator ironises his complacent assumption of masculinist superiority over his wife, he also sounds critical of his unselfconscious expressions of social superiority over Kulli due to his higher-caste status. The wisened narrator rues of his younger years, "I still considered myself a Brahmin in those days. It did not seem unnatural that the dust



on my Brahmin feet should confer purification" (32). It is only when Kulli makes a sexual overture towards him that the narrator is jolted out of the smug assumptions of hegemonic masculinity and realises that the true meaning of Kulli's extravagant admiration for him.

The standpoint from which Nirala narrates and assesses the period that formed him as a revolutionary poet is predicated on the progressive ideal of radical sameness. The episode in Chapter Ten that recounts the narrator's encounter with a *sadhu* is an instance of this outlook. The episode begins with the narrator's expression of his sceptical view of *sadhus* in general and is then employed to illustrate how the narrator's chance encounter with one *sadhu* becomes a site for resolute self-assertion. Assigned the task of assessing the worthiness of an itinerant *sadhu* by the Raja he served, the narrator recounts his conversation with the former. As their conversation unfolds, both the *sadhu* and the narrator are said to have committed the same "spiritual" error: each accords greater significance to secular authority as compared to a divine order, at different points in their heated exchange (58). The narrator signals his final credo of radical egalitarianism when the *sadhu* chides him for assuming the airs of a wealthy patron, when he was in fact merely an employee of the Raja: "[H]ere the *sadhu* erred. A servant is Lord Ram as much as the master" (59). This vision of essential sameness, despite overt differences of social identity, articulate a metaphysical position that Nirala elaborates later in their conversation. Nirala eventually attributes his unflinching fearlessness, in the face of the *sadhu*'s threat of complaining to the Raja, to divine inspiration (59). Interestingly, the narrator locates in his metaphysical vision a common source of independence of spirit as well as his literary creativity. He exclaims, "I saw a light; I began to understand. I had seen this light while composing 'A Bud of Jasmine' and hadn't known what the light was" (*A Life Misspent* 59). This is a metaphysical framework that occludes from critical gaze socially differentiated identities and renders irrelevant the hierarchies that obtain from them.

Notwithstanding this progressive outlook that derives its egalitarianism from metaphysical sameness underlying diverse social identities, an analysis of the narrative structures of Nirala's life-writings from the perspective of caste yields certain contradictions. These contradictions become apparent in the formal choices Nirala makes in these texts and the political implications attendant upon them. Both the texts under consideration are presented as biographies of their eponymous subjects. While Nirala admits to intermixing his account of Kulli Bhat with his own autobiography in *A Life Misspent*, the fact that he chooses to title the text *Kulli Bhat* (in the Hindi original) is indicative of the overall (romantic) biographical impulse to chronicle an extraordinary, though marginal, subject. This biographical impulse is even more explicit in "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" where the stated intent of the account, in its opening passage, is to chronicle the life of an ordinary person. However, the autobiographical impulse within both these texts decentres these biographical projects. This is apparent at the level of the form of the two narratives in that the narration of the 'revolutionary' author eventually comes to assume greater importance than the narration of their eponymous subjects. These texts thereby assume literary-historical value for the accounts they render of the formation of one of the foremost poets of the *Chaayavad* tradition. In *A Life Misspent* Nirala records the spread of his literary fame and the appeal of his poetry to readers across the class divide: "I became known to peasants and landlords" (65). Critical of contemporary literary and political conservatism, Nirala attributes his literary success to his stylistic and thematic innovations (65). Interestingly, these changes in Nirala's literary fortunes have a concomitant effect on his social status. The narrator recounts that with the spread of his literary fame, he had become "an object of wonderment" to the literary critics and the inhabitants of Dalmau. As a mature and successful poet, Nirala finds in Kulli an auditor even more reverential than earlier (65). What makes for a significant portion of Kulli's respect for Nirala is that the latter is an "independent" poet, free of the financial and cultural dependence on courtly patronage (65).

It is precisely a recurrent celebration of this independence of spirit and willingness to experiment with inherited aesthetic, social and political traditions that construct Nirala as a radical artist in the text. However, this radicalism also means that Nirala is effectively the only agential subject in these auto/biographical accounts. For instance, it is Nirala, the non-conforming savarna artist, who encourages Kulli to overlook the objections of “the guardians of Hinduism” and formalise his relationship with a Muslim woman (66–67). Widening the horizons of imaginative possibilities for Kulli, the narrator foments a veritable intellectual revolution in the latter’s life by exhorting him to question received opinion. However, their attempts to exemplify ethical probity in their public and private lives have widely different consequences for the upper caste radical artist and his marginal interlocutor.

It is not just the case that Kulli incurs hostility of the conservative inhabitants of Dalmau for his interfaith marriage. He also earns the suspicion and disapproval of government functionaries and local elites for the social service and consciousness-raising projects he undertakes in Dalmau. It is only through sheer persistence that Kulli manages to earn a measure of social sympathy and respect for his unfaltering commitment to projects of social and political welfare in Dalmau. Curiously, even the narrator’s initial response to Kulli’s report of his political activism in Dalmau is rather tepid. In a conversation between the two, set in the context of the suspension of the Civil Disobedience movement, the narrator expresses his disapproval of politically expedient decision-making by national leaders of the time and expresses his reluctance to follow their lead. The singularly independent-minded artist asserts, “I don’t go along with everything” (69).

While Nirala’s romantic aesthetic that underpins his self-presentation as an unfettered subject is entirely in keeping with the European discourses of romanticism, it does not accord the same centrality to the Dalit subject. The narrator seems to suggest that Kulli’s more simple-minded departures from social norms are essentially a bid to power. Contrasting Kulli’s politically committed activity in Dalmau with his own tentative support for various political causes, Nirala comments: “I showed Kulli I was ordinary. He began to feel himself extraordinary in comparison” (69). This rather dismissive attitude towards Kulli’s radical political activity is also evident in the “fun” the narrator decides to have at Kulli’s expense by suggesting that the latter write to national leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru to fund his social service projects (71)<sup>3</sup>. Satirising the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the national leaders and their constituents, Nirala uses these names to signify the disconnect between the political elite and the grassroots workers. However, it is more pertinent to note that Nirala sets Kulli up for this quest of financial aid from the Congress party despite his awareness that it had minimal chances of success. Not surprisingly, Kulli’s attempts yield no fruit, and it is only Nirala’s intervention in the situation that resolves the problem of funding for Kulli’s school. This narrative structure of the radical artist intervening in the lives of his biographical subject(s) and rescuing them from situations of distress is an oft-repeated one in Nirala’s prose life-writings.

It is only when he visits the school Kulli had set up for the Dalit children of the village that the narrator truly sheds his somewhat cynical and facetious attitude towards Kulli’s service projects. Deeply moved by Kulli’s service to the Dalit children, the narrator records: “I felt that what I had studied was worth nothing. What I had done was worth nothing” (*A Life Misspent* 74). A marked shift in the narratorial tone – from the comic to the sombre – ensues as the narrator reflects on the inequities spawned by casteism, most concretely in the form of the practice of untouchability: “My own civilization had made them lowly” (74). The resolution of this scene of heightened consciousness of the historical cost of caste-based discrimination is effected through the normalisation and restoration of touch as part of their everyday social intercourse between him and the Dalits villagers. The narrator describes his rejection of caste-based norms of socialising thus:

There was no room for cleverness here. My being a poet of God and beauty and splendour was worth nothing. My being a revolutionary was worth even less [...] Please lay the bouquets in my hands the way brothers offer flowers to one another. They [Dalit villagers] smiled and came forward. The differences of bodies melted away. We were one spirit. (*A Life Misspent* 74-75)

This gesture, that restores touch as a part of everyday social intercourse between various castes groups, is primarily a spectacular act. Although transgressive of everyday social norms of caste-governed sociality, it has only a limited effect on the texture of everyday social intercourse in the village. This then generates obvious questions from the Dalit perspective regarding the political efficacy of the narrator's gestures.

Although instances of transgression of caste boundaries, such as the one discussed above, abound in the text, they leave unaltered the basic structure of caste. The limited political purchase of the narrator's progressive gesture is evident in the manner in which Nirala effects the closure of the auto/biographical narrative. When the local priest refuses to officiate at the eleventh-day funereal rites after Kulli's death because of the ambiguity regarding the latter's caste-identity, the narrator improvises a funeral ritual (100-103). The ritual is a veritable performance by the narrator that derives its social sanction from the narrator's identity as a well-known Brahmin writer. The narrator's choice of a non-vegetarian meal right after the performance of the ritual further stages his defiance of the food cultures of the Brahmins. Ostracised by the village Brahmins even in his death, the minority subject (and the questions generated by his minority subject-position) are ironically laid to rest by the well-inclined savarna author. The narration, therefore persistently foregrounds the revolutionary Brahmin subject despite its stated intent to present Kulli as a laudable subject of the biography.

### "Chaturi, the Shoemaker"

The well-inclined savarna narrator also becomes the increasingly central subject of Nirala's auto/biographical sketch, "Chaturi, the Shoemaker". As noted earlier in the essay, Nirala's romantic impulse to chronicle the lives of 'ordinary' people finds expression in his choice of minority subjects for his biographical sketches. The reason for the narrator's deep admiration for Chaturi resides in the latter's insight into the Bhakti corpus that Nirala remarks upon in opening passages of the text. The narrator exclaims that while the upper-caste wordsmiths have historically written and edited books, Chaturi (and others of his community) crafted shoes ("Chaturi, the Shoemaker" 466). Although literary enthusiasts of all caste groups share fine aesthetic sensibilities, the narrator highlights the historical exclusion of the Dalits from mainstream cultural heritage and its economic cost to the community. An interesting power dynamic emerges between Chaturi and the narrator through the former's performance of Kabir bhajans at the narrator's residence. Chaturi is dismissive of the intellectual aridity of academicians who lack insight into the true essence of the Kabir corpus. The narrator, in turn, wonders whether Chaturi held a similarly low opinion of his literary sensibility (467).

An interesting feature of the two texts, "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" and *A Life Misspent*, is the highly self-reflexive narratorial voice that often employs humour to undercut Nirala's attempts at instituting position(s) of authority in his interactions with the eponymous protagonists of the two texts. In *A Life Misspent*, the narrator records his ridiculous attempts at staging hegemonic masculinity in his affinal family. In "Chaturi, the Shoemaker", similarly, the narrator reflects ironically on his implication in the caste system. When Chaturi offers to punctuate his bhajan singing with a commentary on the devotional songs, the narrator is reluctant about the idea at first (467). His unease with Chaturi's assumption of the role of the interpreter of the mystical songs of Kabir is arguably an

unease at Chaturi's resumption of a cultural corpus that belongs more appropriately with the latter's Kabirpanthi Dalit community. Once the narrator has overcome his initial reluctance to play the role of the passive auditor, he feels surprised by the profundity of Chaturi's understanding of the Bhakti tradition. The ability to instruct, the narrator concedes, is not a function of one's caste identity or level of literacy (468).

As in the case of *A Life Misspent*, the narrator's attitude towards his biographical subject, Chaturi, is that of a benevolent savarna reformer. Nirala's sketch is as much about the subject formation of the radical writer as it is about Chaturi. A significant theme in savarna writing on caste reform was that of education of the lower caste people in order to integrate them into the mainstream. Education of the Dalit subject forms a significant theme in "Chaturi, the Shoemaker". After Chaturi has instructed the narrator in the intricacies of the Kabir corpus, he requests the latter to educate his son Arjunva (469). While the narrator makes a liberal teacher to Arjunva, the limitations of his benevolent caste politics are evident in his son's condescending attitude towards the new pupil. The two children replicate the hierarchies of the adult social world, and Chiranjiv asserts his caste superiority by ridiculing Arjunva's pronunciation. The narrator observes that while he treated his pupil with "love", his son's attitude towards Arjunva was ridden with caste prejudices. Regretting the persistent oppression of the 'untouchables', the narrator rues: "*Chamaars* will be oppressed, Brahmins will oppress them. The only cure is to attack at both ends—and yet things are not so simple" (471).

Nirala's son, Chiranjiv, is comparable to the upper caste architects and guardians of standardised Hindi in his insistence on the significance of chastity of pronunciation. Characteristically, the narrator intervenes to save the 'untouchable' subject from further humiliation by his son. Interestingly, the name of the Dalit subject – Arjunva – bears the signifier ('va' appended to Arjun) of his cultural distance from the Sanskrit language (and culture) that has historically formed the basis of the putative superiority of the upper-caste people. The narrator's eventual rescue of Arjunva, and his subsequent apology to him and Chaturi, testify to the sincerity of his attempt at equalising the power differential between them (474). However, the narrative pattern of the rescue of a Dalit character by a well-meaning Brahmin recurs in the latter half of the account.

The 'episode' wherein the narrator enables Chaturi's resistance to his caste-based exploitation by the local landlords is another example of the power dynamic that structures Nirala's relationship with the dispossessed minority subjects of his auto/biographies. At one point during their interaction Chaturi complains to the narrator about the annual demand for an extra pair of shoes by the landlord's man. Educated in the protocols of officialese, the narrator informs Chaturi that he could verify the legitimacy of this demand from the official administrative record.<sup>4</sup> This minor narrative strand finds its closure in the last line of the text, when a somewhat radicalised Chaturi – wisened in legalese through his inspection of the official records – laughs off this exploitative practice (477).

An even more significant rescue effected by the narrator is through his intervention in the face-off between the policeman, who visits Garhakola in order to investigate the political organisation in the village, and the peasants. Set in the context of the nationalist movement, particularly the agitations against the Simon Commission in 1928–29, "Chaturi, the Shoemaker" chronicles the peasants' resistance to an exploitative regime of taxes and rents (Schlossberg 464). The narrator records that several farmers had refused to pay rent inspired by their hope of an eventual economic redressal and stirred by the nationalist fervour of the movement for political independence from colonial rule. It is the narrator's wit and intellectual resourcefulness that blunts the edge of the punitive measures the landlords of the village undertake in reaction to the peasants' revolts. The narrator recounts that the landlords had conspired to trap the poor peasantry in extravagant legal cases. In

what is typical of Nirala's fictionalised auto/biographical voice, humour is employed to stage resistance: when the local policeman comes inquiring after his affiliation to the Congress party, the narrator evades a direct answer and claims to belong to a "universal community of man" ("Chaturi, the Shoemaker" 467). In response to the latter's further enquiry about the nature of this "community", the narrator reels off the names of a few Nobel laureates and leaves the policeman befuddled at his answer (467).

A critical reading of the recurrent narrative patterns of Nirala's auto/biographical prose texts raises interesting questions about the politics of representation of Dalit subjects by savarna authors. The question of link between the writer's identity and their literary expression is a complex one. It rests on implicit assumptions about the very process of literary creation. Nirala's Romantic aesthetic, for instance, links his claims of a divinely inspired literary creativity with his revolutionary credentials in *A Life Misspent* (59). While Nirala's *Chaayavad* makes space for sympathy, identification even, with the minority (Dalit) subject, it remains too occupied with the formation of the writer to take his decentring of the hegemonic upper-caste discourse to its logical conclusion. Nirala's sympathetic sketches of Kulli Bhat and Chaturi are as much about his self-presentation as revolutionary writer-activist as they are about his biographical subjects. Caste, evidentially, is neither attributed the causal role in these accounts of formation of Dalit subjects and their upper-caste counterpart nor is it theorised as a significant determinant of agentiality of the savarna artist. Nevertheless, Nirala's critical subversion of the discursive scaffolding of hegemonic upper-caste masculine identity (in *A Life Misspent*) through a relentless ironising of its constitution is remarkably radical for its moment of production. An examination of radical savarna fiction of the early twentieth century reveals the contradictions that progressive upper-caste participants of the Hindi public sphere encountered in their engagement with the hegemonic impulses of Hindi nationalism. Dalit perspectives on canonical savarna Hindi writing then offers opportunity to pursue questions regarding aesthetic representation of minority subjects and the complex relation of the author's aesthetic choices with their social identity.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Orsini comments on the constitution of a homogenous category of Muslim invaders that fitted in with Orientalist bias against Islam. Given the homogenising impulse of the nationalist imaginary, literary voices of minority subjects were either ignored or dismissed as sectarian discontent (*The Hindi Public Sphere* 3).
- <sup>2</sup> The first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the Chaayavad aesthetic in the writing of four major poets that include Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala', Sumitranandan Pant, Jaishankar Prasad and Mahadevi Verma (Rubin 111).
- <sup>3</sup> Nirala's heated public exchanges with Gandhi and Nehru, on account of their alleged indifference to writers of Hindi fiction and the aesthetic possibilities of the language, hold greater significance than merely being facts of biographical curiosity for Nirala's readers. Satti Khanna in his afterword

to *A Life Misspent*, “Bhavbhay Darunam: Terror of Being”, mentions Nirala’s failed attempts to convince Gandhi and Nehru of the “great progress Hindi had made” and the vigour of Nirala’s own aesthetic practice when he has an opportunity to meet them in public gatherings (114–115). Khanna speculates that Nirala’s satirical rendition of the two leaders in the text might partly be attributed to their putative indifference to Nirala’s aesthetic concerns.

<sup>4</sup>Scott Schlossberg points out that the *jajmani* system that had been granted legal sanction by the British administration in the mid-nineteenth century maintained a formal record of caste obligations and their remuneration in a document called the *wajib-al-urz*. (“Chaturi, the Shoemaker” 470).

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# Life-writing and the Poetics of Temporal Experience in Woolf and Sartre

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TAIS DE LACERDA

**Abstract:** The article aims to discuss how Virginia Woolf and Jean-Paul Sartre sought to bring their “poetic answer” to the question of temporality. Woolf and Sartre were fascinated by the possibility brought by fiction to unveil aspects of the world to the reader, by configuring ways of approaching the daily human experiences that cross us and that we are often not even able to name, but which are a fundamental part of life and what it is to be human. The exploration of language possibilities through literary means emerges as a method to reinvent ways of giving a voice to the incomplete and inconsistent character of the self, welcoming it in its moments of instability, conflict, crisis, and anguish. Opposing the ways of writing lives that showed the ready and finished self, they sought to reveal what was lived in its intrinsic movement of creation. Through their writing, both were able to create a place and a voice in the face of the times in which they lived, in continuous dialogue and tension with their contemporaries, thus renewing the possibilities of life-writing.

**Keywords:** Life-writing, temporality, subjectivity, Virginia Woolf, Jean-Paul Sartre

Since a life has to begin with birth and to continue through the years, these facts must be introduced in order. But have they anything to do with him [the subject of the biography]? That is where doubt begins; the pen trembles; the biography swells into the familiar fungoid growth. . . . Facts have their importance. But that is where the biography comes to grief. The biographer cannot extract the atom. He gives us the husk. Therefore, as things are, the best method would be to separate the two kinds of truth. Let the biographer print fully completely, accurately, the known facts without comment; Then let him write the life as fiction. (Woolf, Notebooks).

## I. Introduction

By exploring the correlation between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience, in *Time and Narrative* (1983), Paul Ricoeur states that, although temporality has an inescapable condition and seems to never be completely transmutable into a form of language or knowledge, narratives draw the characteristics of temporal experience and work as a linguistic articulation that makes the incessant process of temporalisation intelligible. Situated in a specific cultural horizon, we are continuously in a movement to attribute meaning to lived experience and render shape to an existence that, instead of having a ready-made foundation, reveals itself before us in its character of indeterminacy and incompleteness. Thus, as a process of creation and incessant transformation, the self can acquire certain characteristic traits and contours, always constituted within unique material and symbolic circumstances, in a permanent relationship with the values of the historical time in which the subjects are situated. This process does not happen in a linear, controllable, predictable and stable direction, but rather involves oscillations, moments of crisis, and estrangement.

When debating our human possibility to direct a gaze at our own experiences, Ricoeur (1986) criticises both the idea of a subject that is capable of immediately apprehending oneself and the idea of a subject that is incapable of any form of apprehension about oneself. In this way, Ricoeur demarcates his position on this important issue that crosses the field of philosophy and resonates with intensity in the field of psychology, and states that “we only understand ourselves through the great shortcut of the signs of humanity deposited in the works of culture” (Ricoeur 116). Thus, although deprived of an intuition that gives direct access to their being, the subject finds possibilities of elaborating a “hermeneutics of the self” through the mediation of language and cultural meanings. Writing about life, understood as the human experience of temporalisation, is a complex task which involves creating a language to translate sensations, feelings, emotions, and thoughts, all experienced in its singularity and flux, and always historically situated. It involves looking at something that is in continuous movement and beginning a journey to explore possible ways of describing, naming, and expressing aspects of human processes. To act in the world through writing and to have life as material for reflexion and inventiveness, could be a way to open new possibilities for attaining, exploring and comprehending sensitive human experiences in the world. Producing a vast and multifaceted work, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) wrote about their own lives and those of other historical subjects, while exploring many forms of fictional representation of life. Both authors maintained an important relationship with writing since they grew up in households where books had a lot of room and writing was part of daily life. Woolf and Sartre developed the habit of writing profusely throughout their lives, and upheld their position on crucial issues of the time in which they lived. From the debate about the interface between language, culture and subjectivity, this article aims to explore the contributions of Virginia Woolf and Jean-Paul Sartre to the field of discussions involving the topic of life-writing, and seeks to point out how each of the authors sought to bring their “poetic answer” to the question of temporality from unique ways of weaving the threads between life and the narrative.

## II. The poetics of temporal experience in Woolf and Sartre

Throughout her works, Virginia Woolf demonstrates an enormous ability to describe certain “emotional atmospheres” with immense sensitivity. As Hermione Lee (2010) states, Woolf was interested in “how a book works on the reader’s feelings” and she was always exploring new ways to convey emotions “by lingering on the atmosphere of a particular scene” (Lee 98). In the record of her memoirs in *Sketch of the Past*, written between 1939 and 1940, she reveals her desire to rescue these “moments of being”, which permeate her daily life by bringing sensations of intense emotional shock to reality (Woolf, 1985). Whether she refers to the writing of memoirs or fiction or discusses biographical writing, her concern is to narratively reveal the subjective experiences as lived. As Guiguet writes: to her, existing meant “experiencing that dizziness on the ridge between two abysses of the unknown, the self and the non-self” (Guiguet 461). In essays such as *The New Biography* (1927) and *The Art of Biography* (1939), Woolf openly criticises biographies that are written in such a way as to not seem to be an account of a person’s life, but rather of a “wax figure”. The “moments of being” which Woolf sought to give a voice to do not necessarily refer to a voice that emanates from a “self” and she clearly shows, in an entry of her Diary of the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, 1920, her concern about the need to avoid the “danger” of the “damned egotistical self”.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that, although Virginia Woolf’s primary raw materials for her writing were her own memories and life experiences, while writing her

novels, she considered herself to be the “vehicle for the sensation” (Nalbantian 143). It was precisely the search for a way of narrating to allow the expression of emotionally significant “moments of being” that led Woolf to develop her “tunnelling process”. In *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), we see the richness of Woolf’s fictional style, which is capable of revealing temporality as experienced by a singularity, but not presenting a perspective of subjectivity as something closed in itself. As Deborah Parsons (2007) writes: “*Mrs Dalloway*, despite the suggestiveness of its title, nevertheless presents the thoughts and perceptions not of one consciousness but of several” (76). In this novel, Woolf reveals the complex process of becoming a subject, something always experienced within a field of inter-subjective relations. As Ricoeur (1984) comments, the “tunnels” dug in the narrative allow her to show the vision that the characters have of each other and make it possible for her to oscillate between the past and present. Woolf transformed her way of experiencing life into stories that people could relate to by maintaining aspects of certain “universal” human processes revealed from the singular experience, through her method of “scene making”. It is remarkable how Woolf leads us to follow the character of *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) to the banks of a river, to the college lawn, to the library, to dinner parties, to the British Museum and to the streets. She aims to decipher the place of women in society not by means of a purely conceptual description. Woolf creates scenes and makes use of imagination to bring us closer to reality.

As Woolf lived in a period marked by gender fixed roles, and as a woman writer, she found her way to appropriate language to speak from her own viewpoint. In a movement that goes beyond the ready-made forms of naming and meaning in a male-dominated society, this affirmed the possibility of re-establishing women’s place in culture. In this regard, Deborah Parsons (2007) highlights that, in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1920, Virginia Woolf quoted the words of Bathsheba Everdene as exemplifying the position of women as subjects and writers of the English novel: “I have the feelings of a woman, but I have only the language of men” (Parsons 81). Woolf’s quest to create her own style was closely related to a movement to find a language capable of giving expression to women’s experience in society, to account for a historical absence. Therefore, in “Professions for Women” (1931), Woolf reveals that her process of becoming a writer involved an inner struggle with the figure of the “Angel of the House”, which appears as a shadow upon her page (Woolf 142), referring to the modes of being and social roles imposed on women that limit her possibilities of expression. One notes the relationship between aesthetics and ethics throughout Woolf’s path, as her aesthetic quest for a unique style may be closely linked to a quest for affirming the value of women’s experiences, historically neglected by a culture dominated by men. Regarding the way in which women’s lives are represented in books, in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Woolf portrays the immense scarcity of records of female experiences in the biographical or fictional works of her time, saying that she prefers the record of the story of “the girl behind the counter” to “the hundred and fiftieth life of Napoleon”.

*Orlando: A Biography* (1928), the fantastical biography of a time-travelling, sex-changing noble wo/man, illustrates the idea that men’s and women’s lives are conditioned by social and historical circumstances by revealing how Orlando’s transformation into a woman brings new restrictions to her movements and constraints to her pen (Parsons 107). It is worth highlighting that *Orlando* is full of metabiographical fantasies on how to write lifetimes and Woolf’s narrative choices made it possible to explore the multiplicity that can be part of a single character. As Woolf writes in *Orlando* (1928): “a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand”. As Saunders (2010) highlights, this shows Woolf’s radical development of the technique of literary portraiture and also her deconstruction of the Victorian notion of “character”.

In this regard, throughout her work, Woolf manifests this opposition to any form of writing about life that starts from a pretension for objectivity. From her diaries, essays and works of fiction, Woolf is permanently creating new ways to describe “life itself”. She seeks to show life as an unfinished process that swings between familiarity and strangeness, memory and perception, facts and imagination, seeing oneself and being seen by others. Alluding to this inherent complexity of subjective human processes, James Naremore states: “In nearly everything she wrote, we can notice [...] a division between a feeling of selfhood and a feeling of selflessness” (248). In this sense, in works such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), Woolf manages to introduce temporality as something experienced, thus providing a valuable contribution to the development of perspectives on human reality, and strongly influencing many contemporary authors. Among the latter, there are records that show the impact of Virginia Woolf’s works on Beauvoir<sup>1</sup> and Sartre.

Although it is rarely mentioned, Sartre explicitly assumed Woolf’s influence on his work as a novelist: “I tried to take advantage of the technical research carried out by certain novelists of simultaneity such as Dos Passos and Virginia Woolf”, and further remarks: “I picked up on the question where they left off and tried to find something new in that direction. The reader will say if I have succeeded” (Sartre, 1981, 1912). Emphasising the impact of Woolf’s work on Sartre, Annie Cohen-Solal, in *Une renaissance sartrienne* (2013) says that these lectures of the *Le Havre Lyre* could represent a precious “black box” for *La Nausée* and *Les Chemins de la Liberté* (Cohen-Solal, 2013). In *La nausée* (1938), Sartre makes use of apparently banal situations of urban daily life as a starting point for the character’s existential questions. Following the wanderings of Antoine Roquentin, initially “very bourgeoisly installed in the world” (13), well-adjusted to his occupation as a historian and avoiding further questioning that might cause him discomfort, suddenly, something inexplicable surprises him and he is overcome by a feeling of uncontrollable nausea. In his activity as a historian, he realises that the files he must base the biography of the Marquis of Rollebon upon are not enough to establish a logical order of events. Everything depends on the way in which the narrative will develop, on how the facts are linked by the narrator. The character is faced with great existential questions: what is the reality that surrounds us? What is the role of man within this reality? What is the meaning of everything we do? The experience of nausea empties all the reality from the already given senses and places him before his freedom. It is precisely this process of constitution of the subject as temporality and freedom that Sartre seeks to express throughout the three volumes of *Les Chemins de la Liberté*. In *L’Age de raison* (1945) it is possible to note that Mathieu’s actions aim to achieve absolute freedom, a condition that detaches him from his historical process. This man, who chooses to watch life go by from his window, projects himself towards an absolute closure of his existence, so that he is not at the mercy of the oscillations of temporality and can maintain a stable identity. In *Le Sursis* (1945), the character is led to comprehend facticity in the most radical, abrupt, and unavoidable way. Faced with the conscription to war, his existence is “put on hold”, awaiting a new future that must be invented by him at every moment. In *La Mort dans l’âme* (1949), when he realises that the use of reason will not provide him with an ultimate foundation for existence, Mathieu is driven to act in a way that will make him capable of “filling in” his “lack of being”. However, his action only serves to annihilate the idea of man that had served as his guide. Man, who was annihilated as an idea in *La Mort dans l’âme*, remains to be reinvented. The fact that the narrative does not have a final closure compels us to reflect on the opening condition of existence itself. Therefore, Howells states that “Sartre will dismiss as impossible any attempt to take a totalising overview of the human condition” (Howells, 1988, 46). Faced with the scenario created by the war, man finds out that he has always been situated

and that historicity is something that constitutes him. Therefore, he makes the discovery of his own existential condition. It was up to the writer to produce a situated literature, capable of portraying the drama experienced by man in the face of the discovery of his historicity.

This is exactly what Sartre seeks to do throughout his plays, short stories, and novels. Jameson (1961) highlights that Sartre's style results from facing the challenge of describing human existence in a continuous experimentation with new modes of expression. The realisation of the impossibility of finding a language that is capable of "saying" fully and absolutely what is experienced is what opens up the multiple possibilities of "saying it", with the multifaceted work of Sartre being a demonstration of this.

[...] for when all forms are impossible, in the single one is any more impossible than any other, and suddenly they all come into being, all possible, criticism and plays, philosophy, novels, and political and historical and biographical analyses, bringing us face to face with the image of a consciousness for which everything can be understood, and of an untimidated language for which there is nothing that cannot be said (Jameson 204).

Sartre's style was being shaped in order to awaken in the reader the feeling of restlessness and estrangement that accompanies the temporalisation process, as he seeks to provide a re-appropriation of each subject's original condition of freedom. His literature on "extreme situations" sought to portray human dilemmas, not to comfort the reader. His way of configuring his narratives sought to create a fertile ground to awaken a kind of "face to face" with the dynamic and paradoxical character of daily life. Along his intellectual path, Sartre develops a perspective that intends to understand human actions as being part of the process of temporalisation. As far as he is concerned, in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948), language appears to be a tool in the context of human activities and of interpersonal relations. Saying something is a way of revealing aspects of the world and thus producing changes in reality. Thus, when the writer resolves to build a literary narrative, she decides on a theme and a way of telling it, revealing certain aspects of the world to readers; by doing this, the writer engages herself in the world. As a result, Howells (1988) says: "For Sartre, then, literature is not merely fictive, subjective and anecdotal: it is a form of *universel singulier* which reveals the world to its readers" (Howells 48). When the writer chooses to act in the world through the creation of literary narratives, she is choosing a unique way to live her temporality, designing new possibilities of narrating that become part of the culture.

It is precisely this link between temporality, narrativity and subjectivity that Sartre endeavours to investigate when he makes efforts to understand the life of writers such as Gustave Flaubert (1971-2). According to Sartre (1943), biographies usually base their analysis on the "great explanatory idols" of each time: heredity, education, the environment, and physiological constitution. According to him, this type of analysis ends up reducing the complexity of a subject's behaviour, feelings and tastes to some properties which are analogous to those of chemical bodies. Viewing things from a different perspective, Sartre emphasises that Flaubert's literary ambition must be understood as a signifier, and therefore is free. A perspective based on freedom will seek to understand how the writer's literary ambition reveals a radical decision to be unified in the world. Emphasising the process of creation that is intrinsic to the act of telling the story of a life, Sartre (1976) himself assumes that his autobiography *Les Mots* is "a kind of novel, a novel in which I believe" (146). Even when we look at our own past, the facts are told from a chosen point of view, in a movement of creation that brings a plot to life. The action of narrating reveals the existing effort to try to make a dynamic and inapprehensible temporalisation process intelligible. Language is therefore used as a mediation of this narrative creation of the self and of this search for an identity, which involves a movement of reflexive re-appropriation of the original temporality. This moment of reflexive recovery of that which was experienced is conducive to the emergence of multiple possibilities, among which are the various modalities of life-writing that are constructed by the subjects.



### III. Conclusion

We can consider that the main challenge that Virginia Woolf and Jean-Paul Sartre faced throughout their lives was to find a narrative style that is capable of expressing the process of temporalisation as experienced. Writing about life involves taking lived experience as an object. This experience is lived in a “pre-reflexive” way, as pure existential flux. The challenge for both, therefore, was to develop aesthetic possibilities that would enable them to achieve a description of what was experienced based on their sensations and emotions. By doing so, they would provide readers with a “dip” in the atmosphere proposed by the narrative. Woolf and Sartre nurtured an interest in moving the object of writing away from “great men of history”, massively represented in the biographies and monuments that are there to tell us the “official” history. Finding a style that is capable of narratively capturing the experiences of common people in the midst of everyday tensions becomes a challenging exercise for both. Inviting us to shift our gaze (from “heroes”, who are placed in a position of social recognition as those who “make history”, to “ordinary” people who are put in the place of those who are “made” by history), Woolf and Sartre seek to make room by writing about human experiences that are often relegated to an absence of representation and considered worthless. Both choose these experiences as the object of their writing, revealing an effort to validate these experiences and show that, throughout life, there is an intense process of creation in progress.

Woolf and Sartre were fascinated by the possibility of fiction unveiling aspects of the world to the reader, configuring aesthetic-ethical ways of approaching the daily human experiences that cross us and that we often cannot even name. The exploration of language possibilities through literary means emerges as a method to reinvent ways of giving a voice to the incomplete and inconsistent character of the self, welcoming it in its moments of instability, conflict, crisis, and anguish, which Ewald (2017) calls “circumstantial emotional estrangements”. Experiences of conflict and confusion, as Peter Goldie (2012) states, must not be seen as a “threat to the survival of the narrative self”, but as part of the process of what it is to be human. Woolf and Sartre portrayed these moments in their works in multiple ways, opening our way of understanding human processes. In contrast to the ways of writing lives that showed the ready and finished self, they sought to reveal what was lived in its intrinsic movement of creation. Through their writing, both were able to create a place and voice in the face of the times in which they lived, in continuous dialogue and tension with their contemporaries, renewing the aesthetic and ethical possibilities of life-writing.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Madeleine Gobeil, published in *Paris Review* (1965), Simone de Beauvoir says: “Virginia Woolf is one of the women writers who has interested me most.” Tidd (2004) states that Beauvoir “alighted on Woolf’s fourth novel, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), to provide answers to her own questions concerning language and the novel” (138). Kate Kirkpatrick’s (2019) mentions that Beauvoir used to take “refuge” in the books of Virginia Woolf as a way of “returning to herself” (Kirkpatrick 298).

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## JOURNALS RECEIVED

*British Journal of Aesthetics, Comparative Literature, New Literary History, Poetics Today, Philosophy and Literature, Critical Inquiry, Journal of Modern Literature, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

The *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* (ISSN 0252-8169) is a quarterly peer-reviewed academic journal published by Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute, India since 1977. (Vishvanatha Kaviraja, most widely known for his masterpiece in aesthetics, *Sabityadarpana* or the “Mirror of Composition”, was a prolific 14th-century Indian poet, scholar, and rhetorician.) The Institute was founded by Prof. Ananta Charan Sukla (1942-2020) on 22 August 1977, coinciding with the birth centenary of renowned philosopher, aesthetician, and art historian, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), to promote interdisciplinary studies and research in comparative literature, cultural theory, aesthetics, philosophy and criticism of the arts, art history, and history of ideas. Sukla edited and published the journal for over 40 years as the founding editor.

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The *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* is the official organ of Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute, India, registered under the Societies Registration Act No. XXI of 1860 (No. 13094/2030 of 1977-78). All contributions, institutional or individual, to the sustaining fund will be gratefully acknowledged. Voluntary donations to the Institute are deductible from income tax returns under Section 80-G of the Income Tax Act, 1961 as the Journal is a non-profit academic publication. Advertising space in the Journal (limited to material of scholarly interest to our readers) is also available.

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